

Introduction

This book is about the ways deity and divine agency are conceptualized. It focuses on the deities, divine images, and representatives in the Hebrew Bible, and will ultimately focus on the way that text itself became a channel for hosting divine agency. The book is also about categories and how we develop and use them. This includes categories like “deity” and “divine agent,” but also the conceptual categories scholars use to evaluate and to talk about them, and more specifically, the dichotomies that scholars often use to draw clear lines around those categories. It simplifies our task when we can draw hard and fast lines to distinguish deity from humanity, monotheism from polytheism, the religious from the secular, and cultic images from the deities they index.¹ However, the continued use of these dichotomies does not so much serve the interests of inquiry as it does the interests of the theological and academic structuring of power and values.² There is a saying attributed to George E. P. Box that all models are wrong, but some are useful. Many of these dichotomous models on which scholars have been relying have remained useful all these years for reasons that are often problematic. Now, certainly the model I will develop and apply will also be wrong in many ways, but this book is mostly an argument for its usefulness in helping to break some of

¹ Brett Maiden’s (2020) *Cognitive Science and Ancient Israelite Religion* is an application of the cognitive science of religion to ancient Israelite and Judahite ideologies that includes a chapter on “rethinking” the popular/official religion dichotomy, but the volume still treats “religion” and “ontology” as central categories. Maiden’s fifth chapter addresses many of the same questions as this volume, but is quite distinct in methodology and in scope. For other discussions of deity in the Hebrew Bible within a cognitive framework, see Singletary 2021; Stowers 2021.

² Note Brittany Wilson’s (2021, 6) comments regarding Christianity’s accommodation of Platonism: “Within this worldview, we find a range of related dichotomies that have their roots in Platonic thought and that often bubble to the surface in discussions of biblical embodiment (divine or otherwise). Such dichotomies include (but are not limited to): reality/representation, being/becoming, divine/human, immaterial/material, invisible/visible, form/matter, Creator/creation, soul/body.” For more thorough discussions of some of these dichotomies and their entanglement with power, see Stroumsa 2010, 2021.