# The God Yahweh’s Body and Personality in Israelite Myth

### *Background*

The relationship between the God Yahweh and the People Israel stands at the center of biblical literature. The Bible does not necessary claim that Yahweh is the only god who exists, but it demands that the People Israel worship him alone. The Bible is not the source of this claim, but rather its expression; the mythohistorical depiction of the ties between Yahweh and Israel aims to provide an explanation for the beliefs and rituals that the original authors, redactors, and readers of the biblical texts knew and practiced. The first part of the Bible—the five books known as the Torah or Pentateuch—consists of a myth retelling how this God and this people began to weave their fates together.

As in the case of other gods, Yahweh was considered by his adherents to possess a personality as well as a physical body. Like human beings, he loves and hates, is merciful and vengeful, encouraging and jealous. His body also resembles that of his human creations, whom the story says were fashioned in his image, although the divine body exceeds the frame of the human form: in its size, its manifestation, and in its ability to be revealed and disappear, to fly and to walk, to be unified and dispersed. This project will be devoted to the connection between these two aspects of biblical anthropomorphism: Yahweh’s personality and his body. What is the relation between the biblical God’s qualities, interests, and emotions, and his incarnation as a body in space? How are these two aspects expressed in the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, as it is depicted in the Pentateuch?

*Interpersonal Relations and Spatial Presence*

In ongoing relationships, such as those between romantic partners or parents and children, emotional intimacy is expressed, among other ways, through physical intimacy, while anger and estrangement cause distance and sometimes even the avoidance of eye contact. In political contexts, only the sovereign’s most trusted counselors are permitted to see his face unmediated. Likewise, physical intimacy or detachment also influence other dimensions of relationships.

So too, the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in the Pentateuch is dynamic and complex. Its emotional, social, and even political aspects are expressed in various forms of physical intimacy and detachment. Thus, for example, we are told that after a collective ritual transgression, Yahweh decides not to walk in the midst of the Israelites from the desert to the Land of Canaan, but instead to send an angel who will guide them on the way. Yahweh connects this decision to the character of the people, and, by implication, to his own character: He warns them that if he were to walk in their midst, he might impulsively annihilate them. However, the Israelites are not satisfied with the manifestation of the angel; Moses argues that Yahweh’s love for his people should be expressed with his full presence among them. In the end, Yahweh concedes to their pleadings; as a sign of his acquiescence, he appears to Moses in his human form. Later in the story, however, the warning comes to fruition: in a moment of uncontrollable anger, Yahweh almost destroys the entire people.

This example illustrates how the interpersonal relationship between Yahweh and Israel is expressed through Yahweh’s embodiment in space: his manifestation through the means of an angel is not only a theological convention but also a certain expression of intimacy or detachment, that entails moral and emotional considerations. My research will trace the ups and downs of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in terms of these two dimensions: on the one hand, the extent and nature of Yahweh’s embodied presence—in heaven or in the sanctuary, directly or by means of an angel, in a pillar of fire or in the Ark of the Covenant—and on the other, emotions and interpersonal relations, such as anger as opposed to mercy, jealousy as opposed to commitment to the covenant. I will examine the connection between Yahweh’s personality and his embodiment in space across the narrative sequence of the Pentateuch, for the authors do not depict the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as static, but rather as a dynamic, and even fragile and delicate, one that requires constant maintenance.

*Metaphor and Representation*

The various expressions the Bible uses to describe Yahweh’s spatial embodiment were later interpreted, in both Judaism and Christianity, abstractly or metaphorically. Philosophical perspectives asserting that God cannot appear in bodily form forced religious thinkers to explain these expressions as hinting at another, as it were loftier meaning. A similar hermeneutic strategy was also adopted with respect to expressions depicting Yahweh’s emotions, cravings, and troubles. These religious-hermeneutic tendencies are also not absent from modern critical scholarship, which remains saturated with theological premises. As a corrective, tracing the precise terminology used by the biblical authors shows that we must attempt to read such expressions in a literal way. This project will comprehensively examine the semantics of both the spatial and corporeal terms and the emotional and interpersonal terms used to depict Yahweh in the Bible.

At the same time, an overly literal reading can easily go astray in its insensitivity. Already at the time of their composition, the myths depicting Yahweh’s concrete, spatial presence related to the distant past. The authors retold that in ancient days Yahweh would walk in the midst of the Israelites in his spectacular and terrifying human form; however, in their familiar present, there were only statues, pillars, the altar, and the ark. The myth was obliged to fill this void in various ways, such as the story of an ancient revelation in the place where the Temple stands today, or in the depiction of the first kindling of divine fire on the altar, or when the laws were first set down in writing. The function of the prophets in the First and Second Temple periods was also often understood on the basis of the mythical depiction of the origins of the prophetic phenomenon, which, at least according to some biblical narratives, began in the days of Moses.

Thus a sensitive reading of myth is an indirect but indispensable way to understand the role of ritual and prophecy in ancient Israelite religion: the yearning for sacred space alongside the aversion of it, and the conflicting requirement to enter such space and the severe restrictions on doing so; the use of objects bearing representational significance during times of national and personal crisis, which sometimes end in disappointment because of Yahweh’s lack of response; the various means of communication with Yahweh, and the doubts that arose concerning their reliability—the meaning of all of the above will be clarified through an examination of the canonical narrative of the foundational period of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

*Different Religious Approaches*

The Pentateuch contains more than one answer to the question of the connection between God’s personality and his spatial embodiment across the narrative sequence. My research will distinguish between different textual layers that were interwoven by the redactors of the Pentateuch, and will uncover different, and sometimes contradictory, approaches to the relations between Yahweh and Israel. For example, regarding the ark placed in the sanctuary: some passages relate that Yahweh revealed himself to Moses between the two golden statues that stood above the gilded cover of the ark. According to other biblical texts, the ark represented Yahweh himself, and when it moved, Moses would declare: “Advance, Yahweh!” A third approach makes clear that the two tablets of the covenant that Yahweh gave to Moses were placed in the ark, but the ark itself does not contain any divine presence. This disagreement touches on the details of the mythical plot, but it also has weighty implications for the conception of divine presence and ritual.

The project will include, therefore, a comparative dimension, and will examine different mythical-theological approaches that are included in the biblical canon itself. In addition, the study will compare the depictions of Yahweh in the Pentateuch with depictions of other gods, both in ancient Near Eastern cultures and in the Pentateuch itself. For example, when Moses warns the Israelites that they may worship “man-made gods of wood and stone, that cannot see or hear or eat or smell,” should we interpret the verse to mean that Yahweh does see, hear, eat, and smell?

*Conclusion*

My research will examine the connection between the spatial manifestation of the biblical God and his personality as they are expressed in his relationship with the Israelites, according to the narrative flow of the Pentateuch. I will attempt to do so through a distinction between the different literary layers that make up biblical literature, and in comparison with the Bible’s surrounding cultures. In addition to contributing to the study of ancient Israelite religion and biblical literature, this project will contribute to a wider understanding of various religious concepts, metaphor and representation in religious language, and the role of myth in providing meaning to ritual.

In addition to the fields of Biblical Studies and Jewish Thought in which I have specialized thus far, I will devote effort to making myself more familiar with the fields of Religious Studies and Anthropology of Religion. This work will allow me to delve deeper in my understanding of the connections between myth and ritual, and also will enable me to fully master the linguistic theories that illuminate the distinction between literal versus metaphoric reading. I will further my study of other ancient languages with the goal of gaining intimate familiarity with diverse texts of that time period. The rich intellectual environment of the Martin Buber Society of Fellows is an ideal home for this project, and I hope that I will be granted this valuable opportunity to become a part of it.