Anthropomorphism, Myth, and Ritual
in Ancient Israelite Religion

Research Proposal | Ariel Seri-Levi

The Bible describes God not as an entity but as a personality, not as some*thing* but as some*one*. This phenomenon, known as anthropomorphism, should be the underpinning of any study of ancient Israelite religion, but in practice it has been given relatively little space in earlier scholarship. The past few decades have seen growing research attention to the divine body in Scripture, particularly in comparison with other religions of the ancient Near East. The humanness of the biblical God, however, is manifested not only in His body but also, and mainly, in His personality. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the pioneering works of the late Yochanan Muffs, this dimension of Biblical anthropomorphism still awaits systematic research.

In my doctoral dissertation, I investigated so-called “divine anger” in the Bible—a phenomenon that has been considered an predominant character trait of the “Old Testament God” since early Christianity. I showed that we are dealing here not with a single, uniform phenomenon requiring a comprehensive explanation, but rather with a range of phenomena that mirror different perceptions of the causes of divine anger, its mechanism, and the measures that people and even God Himself take to keep this rage from erupting or to calm it once it has burst out. What the various approaches have in common is the composition of a rich, complex, and delicate divine personality; each approach has implications for the shaping of the ritual and the sanctified space. I realized that biblical anthropomorphism is not only a literary motif, but is instead an essential component of the biblical worldview and that understanding it in depth is key to a better understanding of biblical religion overall.

Accordingly, in the proposed study I wish to investigate more broadly the role of the divine personality in the religious practices of ancient Israelite culture as reflected in the Bible. The study will answer two questions: What role did myths about the divine personality play in shaping the religious reality of the ancient Israelites, the creators and original addressees of the Bible? Did they view God, as a personality, only as a literary hero from the past or also as an object of reference in the present?

Biblical anthropomorphism is sometimes perceived as a vestige of primitive mythical thinking that has no place in institutionalized religion. In research on biblical literature, this perspective is manifested in a distinction between biblical law and biblical narrative, the former perceived as distinct from the latter and even of later provenance—particularly in regard to the ramified ritual laws that are identified with the Priestly schools. Some see law as superior to narrative: rational, organized, and devoid of metaphysics; others consider it inferior: pedantic, lifeless, and dessicated. Either way, divine anthromorphism ostensibly belongs to the world of myth and not to that of ritual, to biblical narrative not biblical law.

Research has explained the role of biblical myth in diverse ways, of which I will note three. The first is etiology (the study of causation): a myth is meant to explain a known phenomenon by telling a story about its origin in the distant past. A story about the divine revelation to a national patriarch in a certain city in the past, for example, shows that this city is a worthy place for the construction of a temple in the present. The other two explanations pertain to the broad narrative frame of God’s relations with the People Israel in the Bible. An explanation affirmed mainly by Jewish scholars is that the myth generally serves to justify for the existence of the laws. Other researchers, largely Christian, see the narrative frame as an expression of a freely standing “theology” dissociated from the commandments.

In distinction to these three tendencies, I construe biblical myth as explaining not only the origin of a certain religious institution but also its current meaning for those who created the text and those to whom it is addressed; not only the comprehensive system of law but also its details, and not only faith or theology but daily practice as well. I will focus on four topics that appear both in the narrative portions of the Bible and in its ritual-legalistic portions. In regard to each, I will ask how the divine personality, as it is embodied in the myth, also finds expression in ritual and belongs inseparably to the public and private religious reality in ancient Israel. These topics are the Ark of the Covenant, incense, circumcision, and God’s name.

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The Ark was stationed in the innermost and the holiest part of the First Temple in Jerusalem. Controversy over its function already appears in the Bible itself. Several stories attribute a lethal divine power to the Ark, which burst forth when the Ark is touched or even viewed. I intend, however, to discuss the biblical stories and laws that deal with the Ark in view of another, seemingly unrelated biblical theme: God’s ambivalence between a desire to be seen and a fear of exposure. I claim that these relations of attraction and repulsion and the dual potential entailed in approaching God—blessing and protection along with mortal danger—were transposed from the deity to the Ark. Accordingly, those visiting the Temple and the priests who served there believed that it is the divine persona, and not only an inanimate object, that awakens an abstract sense of sanctity in them, that resides in their midst. This analysis will also contribute to the ongoing debate over the visual representation of God in Israelite religion.

The second topic of interest in this study is incense: a daily Temple practice that the priestly code, in its typical way, insists must be conducted according to rigid rules but offers no explanation of its purpose and how it operates. A study of the Pentateuchal, Prophetic, and Wisdom literature will reveal the centrality of the incense rite as a religious activity that expresses allegiance and belonging to God, its role in placating Him, and the disasters that may come about if it is performed improperly. I will argue that the divine persona is the addressee of the burning of the incense and that anthropomorphism is key to understanding the role of the incense in both the daily Temple ritual and in extreme situations.

The commandment of circumcision is rooted in the story of the covenant that God concludes with Abraham. By implication, circumcision is meant to remind God of His obligation to assure the proliferation of the Israelites, for which reason, evidently, the practice is performed specifically on the genitals. In a mysterious passage in Exodus, however, circumcision is presented as a practice that protects the individual against God, who wishes to kill him for no perceptible reason. Both passages share a perception that circumcision is directed at the divine personality. The Bible offers various explanations for this act; I will examine them in depth and weigh the possibility that circumcision is a sign of belonging to the Israelite ethnic collective and has nothing directly to do with God.

The biblical God, like other gods and like human beings, has a given name. Like the Ark, God’s name is presented in many biblical passages as being able to confer blessing and protection but also to precipitate disaster. Although the tangled nexus of God’s name and the establishment of His presence or representation has been discussed in the research, its bold personal dimension is largely obscured. Here I wish to ask: What does calling God by his “first name” have in common with similarly addressing a person? Is an offense against God’s name an offense against God? Why is God so anxious about the possibility that His good name will be besmirched in the eyes of surrounding peoples? I will similarly revisit the classical assertion in biblical studies that the emphasis on God’s presence by means of His name is meant to substitute for His physical presence in the Temple and reflects a more abstract and less anthropomorphic concept of God.

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The proposed study challenges the classical distinction in Religious Studies, and even in Biblical and Jewish Studies, between magic and religion; it also challenges the similar distinction between the realistic and nominalistic perception of religious law. The first distinction concerns itself with the question of whether ritual is meant to affect reality directly, with no need for divine involvement and in fact in circumvention of God’s will—or whether its purpose is to placate God by obeying His orders irrespective of their content. The second differentiation is tied to the question of biblical impurity: does it exist in reality or do the rules pertaining to it emanate from internal legal reasoning?

The commandments, I argue, were perceived in ancient Israelite culture not only as influencing reality or placating God but also as influencing God as a persona. This is in view of the realization that stories about the creation of religious practices in antiquity aim not to provide historical information about the circumstances of their emergence, but to explain their function and meaning in the present. Belief in a God who has a complex and well-developed personality was not only a vestige of an ancient primitive faith; it also grounded and explained the ritual laws of the biblical religion.

To carry out a study of this kind, I will need to combine the philological-historical method of Biblical Studies with the conceptual and theoretical research tools of Jewish Thought, Philosophy, and Religious Studies—an integration that I applied and developed in my dissertation and in other studies. By using this methodology, I will make sure that the study will yield credible and grounded findings and subject them to in-depth analysis. Beyond this, it will allow me to draw clear and fine distinctions among contrasting theological outlooks embedded in the Bible, in a way that will not blur the differences among them but rather will compile the various details into a larger and clearer picture.

The results of this study will ground future research to determine how these and other commandments were perceived in post-biblical Judaism: Did the divergent approaches fuse into one or continue to exist in parallel, or might one approach have prevailed over the others? Are claims related to the divine persona considered valid in halakhic discussion of the minutiae of one commandment or another? These questions are important for understanding the perception of the religious act in medieval Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, and more, and for study of traditions that opposed the anchoring of religious life in ramified normative legislation, ancient Christianity foremost among them.

My goal during my post-doctoral studies is to deepen and broaden the skills that I acquired in Biblical Studies, Jewish Thought, and Religious Studies, and to branch into new fields related to my research interests, including semiotics, the anthropology of religion, and other ancient and modern languages. The vibrant intellectual environment of the Martin Buber Society of Fellows is the ideal venue for the proposed research and for my continued development as a scholar, and I look forward to the opportunity to join the program and contribute to it to the best of my ability.