Myth, Ritual and God’s Persona  
in Ancient Israelite Religion

### Abstract

This research project is dedicated to understanding the role played by the persona of God in the myth and ritual of ancient Israelite religion. It will examine four subjects of great importance to biblical literature: the Ark of the Covenant, incense, circumcision, and the name of God. For each subject, a philological-historical and conceptual analysis of the ritual laws in the Bible, biblical narrative, and additional biblical genres will reveal the understanding that the God of the Bible is not an abstract entity, and not even a physical entity in space, but rather a complex and multi-faceted persona. This work will show how this understanding is expressed in the way that ancient Israelites interpreted the act of ritual. Beyond the tools of Biblical Studies, this research will use tools from the fields of Jewish Thought and Religious Studies. The insights and questions it sparks will lead to a new understanding of myth, ritual, the conception of God, and the relationship between these ideas, in the Bible and in general.

### Background

The Hebrew Bible describes God not as an entity but as a persona, 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 (Smith; Hamori; Knafl; Sommer). The humanness of the biblical God, however, is not only manifested in his body but is also manifested mainly in his *persona*. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the pioneering works of the late Yochanan Muffs (Muffs), this dimension of Biblical anthropomorphism still awaits systematic research.

In my doctoral dissertation, “Divine Anger, its Appeasement in the Pentateuch, and its Sources,” I investigated so-called “divine anger” in the Hebrew Bible—a phenomenon that has been considered a predominant character trait of the “Old Testament God” since early Christianity. I showed that this trait is not a single, uniform phenomenon requiring a comprehensive explanation. Rather it is a range of phenomena that reflect different perceptions of the causes of divine anger, its mechanism, and the measures that people and even God himself take to prevent this rage from erupting, or to placate it once it has burst out. These various approaches each share the construction of a rich, complex, and subtle divine persona; each approach has implications for the shaping of ritual and the sanctified space. I demonstrated that biblical anthropomorphism is not just a literary motif; it is an essential component of the biblical worldview. I realized that understanding this worldview 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 persona in the religious practices of ancient Israelite culture as it is reflected in the Bible. This study will seek to answer two questions: What role did myths about the divine persona play in shaping the religious reality of the ancient Israelites, the creators and original addressees of the Bible? Did they view the persona of God, solely as a literary hero from the past, or also as a partner in a relationship in the present?

Biblical anthropomorphism is sometimes perceived as a vestige of primitive mythical thinking that has no place in institutionalized religion (literature). This perspective often manifests in a distinction between biblical law and biblical narrative, the former perceived as distinct from the latter and even of later provenance—particularly with regard to the complex ritual laws that are identified with the Priestly schools (literature). Some see law as superior to narrative: rational, organized, and devoid of metaphysics; others consider it inferior: pedantic, lifeless, and desiccated. Either way, divine anthropomorphism ostensibly belongs to the world of *myth* and not to that of *ritual*, to biblical *narrative* and 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 (literature). The other two explanations pertain to the broad narrative frame of God’s relations with the People of Israel in the Bible. An explanation affirmed mainly by Jewish scholars, is that the myth generally serves to justify the observance of the commandments (literature). Other scholars, largely Christian, see the narrative frame as an expression of a freely standing “theology” dissociated from the law (literature).

In contrast to these three tendencies, I argue that biblical myth explains 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.

### Objectives

I will focus on four subjects 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 persona, 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 the name of God:

1. ***The Ark*** was stationed in the innermost and 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 bursts forth when the Ark is touched or even viewed. I intend to discuss the biblical stories and laws that deal with the Ark in relation to another, seemingly unrelated biblical theme: God’s ambivalence, between a desire to be seen and a fear of exposure (literature). 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 that resides in their midst, and not only an inanimate object that awakens an abstract sense of sanctity. This analysis will also contribute to the ongoing debate over the visual representation of God in Israelite religion (literature).
2. The second topic of interest in this study is ***incense***: a daily Temple practice that the priestly literature, in its typical way, insists must be conducted according to rigid rules but offers no explanation of its purpose or how it operates (literature). 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.
3. The commandment of ***circumcision*** is rooted in the story of the covenant that God completes with Abraham (Genesis 17). 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 (literature). In a mysterious passage in Exodus, however, circumcision is presented as a practice that protects Moses against God, who wishes to kill him for no perceptible reason (Exodus 4:24–26). Both passages share a perception that circumcision is directed at the divine persona. The Bible offers various explanations for this act; I will examine them in depth and weigh, among others, the possibility that circumcision is a sign of belonging to the Israelite ethnic collective and has nothing directly to do with God.
4. Like the Ark, ***the name of God*** is presented in many biblical passages as being able to confer blessing and protection but also to precipitate disaster. Although the tangled nexus of the name of God and the establishment of his presence or representation has been discussed in the scholarly literature (literature), its personal dimension has been largely ignored. 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 the name of God 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 therefore reflects a more abstract and less anthropomorphic concept of God (literature).

### Methodology

This study will be based on a necessary – although rare in research – integration between the philological-historical approach widely accepted in Biblical Studies, and theoretical tools from the fields of Jewish Thought, Philosophy, and Religious Studies. I have gained expertise in each of these fields throughout the course of my studies. My main expertise is in Biblical Studies, in the philological-historical approach with an emphasis on the study of the Pentateuch and Biblical Semantics. In parallel, my graduate studies were in Jewish Thought, and in the last two years I have been a member of a Religious Studies research group, studying topics in the scholarship on ritual, through a comparison of biblical and ancient Jewish texts, and texts from Sanskrit Mimamsa literature. In my doctoral work I demonstrated that the integration of the philological approach with broader conceptual, theological, philosophical, and literary questions leads to results that would not have been available with only one of these approaches in isolation. With this methodological integration, my research is similar to that of other researchers, such as Zomer (literature).

There are studies that examine biblical theology in a harmonious manner, without distinguishing between the various elements of the text. These studies sometimes tend towards anachronism or apologetics, when examining religious ideas within the Bible. My research does not assume that the Bible is composed of one unit, but rather exposes the wide range of theological diversity and deep disagreements that are reflected within the various works of biblical literature. It begins with a textual and linguistic analysis of the text with the goal of identifying the most probable time and place of the text, as well as its manner of composition and editing. With regard to texts from the Pentateuch, my research is close to the Neo-Documentary method (literature). In contrast to methods that focus on isolated units of text, or on the complete, edited canonical Pentateuch, my method allows the examination of each story and law against the background of the source it belongs to, and exposes a wide range of theological understandings, each with its own internal logic and deep questions that it engages with. For example, the Ark of the Covenant is the subject of a deep intra-biblical controversy, and there is a need to differentiate between various traditions and sources, that have origins in a range of ideological schools and time periods, in order to describe precisely and in depth the various conceptions related to it.

In the second stage, I analyze foundational concepts in the text form a semantic perspective. Often, researchers assume that concepts familiar to us from our own culture, such as “holiness,” “atonement,” “angels,” or “anger” are identical to various terms in Biblical Hebrew. As a result, they miss the opportunity to investigate the original meaning of central terms in biblical religion, before they were covered in layers of Jewish, Christian, and other interpretation and redefined in modern language. In my research, I further investigate the path laid by researchers like… who sought to re-understand the foundational concepts of biblical religion from a precise semantic perspective, conscious of the risk of anachronism present before all researchers of ancient cultures. Special care must be taken to avoid the tendency towards abstraction: the assumption that the texts do not “really” mean what they say, but rather mean something else, that is abstract and symbolic.

For example, the Bible uses the same relatively rare verb *pāraṣ* to describe the action that God is likely to do towards someone who attempts to glance at him from close by (Numbers 19, 22, 24) and to describe God’s killing of Uzzah after Uzzah touches the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6: 8). Modern translations of the Bible, in contrast, choose to translate *pāraṣ* with a different verb each time, and as a result miss the possible connection between the texts, and more importantly, between these phenomena. A precise understanding of the meaning of the verb *pāraṣ* would allow us to decipher the nature of the connection between closeness to the Ark and its lethal consequences, and the dangers involved in being too close to God himself, and as a result, the possibility that the Ark would be understood as the embodiment of God’s persona.

The third stage of this research is the reconceptualization of religious ideas that emerge from the texts, by comparing them to each other, and using conceptual tools from the fields of Philosophy, Jewish Thought, and Religious Studies. A similar methodological integration has emerged in recent decades, in scholarship on rabbinic literature (Halbertal, Lorberbaum, Rosen-Zvi). However, it seems that it is not yet common in Biblical Studies. Philosophical analyses of the Bible are not rare. However, they mostly ignore the accomplishments of philological-historical scholarship, with the assumption that this scholarship only touches on technical matters that lack significance and are not relevant for someone interested in a deep examination of the religious ideas within the Bible. In my scholarship, conceptual analysis must be based on solid philological foundations in order to lead to established conclusions, and not to speculation. At the same time, conceptual questions that lay at the heart of this scholarship, often lead to new philological findings as well. For example, in my doctoral work, an analysis of the mechanism of divine anger – a subject that is dealt with at length by theologians – required a precise examination of what are considered to be “anger terms.” This examination led to new findings relating to significant expressions in Biblical Hebrew, the meanings of which, researchers had assumed were well understood, to the point that they did not feel any need to clarify them.

### Significance

The questions, conclusions, and implications of this research touch on several fields: Biblical Studies, Jewish Thought, and Religious Studies. First, the research will examine, both horizontally and vertically – synchronically and diachronically – issues that lie at the heart of biblical religion and biblical literature. For biblical religion, this research will shed light on the earliest written commentaries on biblical ritual, those that are embedded within the Bible itself. This research will provide insights on the meaning that early Israelites gave to their religious customs. For biblical literature, this research will clarify the relationship between ritual in the Pentateuch and other stories and texts in the Bible.

The significance of these clarifications deviates from the field of Biblical Studies and touches on foundational questions in Religious Studies, regarding the meaning and role of rituals and myths, and the relationship between them. Inter alia, it will deal with the classical distinction in scholarship between magic and religion, which has also found its way into Biblical Studies and Judaic Studies. According to this distinction, magic is an action that has a causal influence on the impersonal forces that control reality. In contrast, religion is a petition to the will of a sovereign God in an attempt to convince God to benefit a person. Despite the criticism of this distinction, it appears to still hold weight in discussions of the role of ritual. In light of the distinction between impersonal influence and personal placation, my research will raise the possibility of personal influence, meaning that ritual can act on God, not as a mechanism of convincing God, but still as an action on God’s persona, necessarily as a persona. 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 line with 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.

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.

### Evaluation and Dissemination

I intend to publish at least one article on each of the four subjects I have identified: the Ark of the Covenant, incense, circumcision, and the name of God, as well as a more theoretical article that will examine the methodological issues involved in this research and the insights that are likely to emerge from it for the field of Religious Studies. Some of the articles, which will be more philological in character, will be sent to central stages in Biblical Studies, such as the Journal of Biblical Literature, and Vetus Testamentum. Others will be sent to more theory-centered publications, such as the Harvard Theological Review, and the Journal of Religion. I have already begun work on the article concerning the Ark of the Covenant. However, my main goal for the present year is completing the adaptation of my doctoral research into a book, and preparing individual articles based on my doctoral work.

At the end of this project, the articles, which will be published in English, will be collected, and adapted for publication as a Hebrew monograph, such that the fruits of this research will be accessible to an Israeli audience, and spark discussion in Israeli academia. I expect that there will be opportunities to present my research to scholars from relevant disciplines at Yale University and at additional academic fora in the United States. An additional aspiration of mine is to collaborate with a scholar of Second Temple or Rabbinic Literature and co-edit a continuing research project that will examine the changes and continuities in the subject of the divine persona, myth, and ritual, from the Bible to post-biblical literature.

### Justification for Residence in the United States for the Proposed Project

The research that I have conducted until this point is based on the foundations of the philological-historical approach that I gained expertise in, in the Israeli academy. However, this research could not have been conducted were it not for my intensive exposure to American scholarship. From the times that I was invited to conferences in the United States, it became clear to me that it is not enough to just read the scholarship that is written in the United States. Rather, there is a critical and essential need to have close encounters, conversations, personal connections, and intellectual negotiation. The lasting relationships I have formed with individual scholars, such as Gary Anderson, Benjamin Sommer, and David Lambert, have widened my horizons, enriched my world, and challenged me with new questions. That being said, my research has remained mostly Israeli. After many years of study in Israel, I yearn to meaningfully participate, not just as a guest for a number of days, in the academic world of the United States. I hope that I will be able to gain close familiarity with the scholars whose work has taught me so much. No less importantly, I hope to meet scholars and learn from scholarship that I am not yet aware of, and that has the potential to transform me into a better, more skilled, and open scholar, with wider horizons.

Yale University is the ideal place for intellectual growth. Professor Joel Baden, one of the leading biblical scholars in the world today, was kind enough to invite me to study at Yale Divinity School and has agreed to guide my research. I have learned so much from Professor Baden’s scholarship and we have met several times. I have no doubt that his guidance will be challenging, beneficial, and even enjoyable. I also hope to collaborate with Professor Jacqueline Vayntrub, who is integrating, in a fascinating way, philological scholarship and critical conceptual analysis. I have already reached out to her. I have also learned so much from the scholarship of Professor Christine Hayes and would look forward to the possibility of getting to know her and learn from her directly.

For me, the very opportunity to study at Yale Divinity School is an intellectually refreshing innovation, as there is no similar type of institution in Israel. It opens horizons different from those that are available in Israeli scholarship, where Biblical Studies are embedded deep within Judaic Studies, and hardly engage in dialogue with the study of other religions, or other fields in general. In addition to my research in the Divinity School, I hope to take part in the activities of the Center for Judaic Studies and the Department of Religious Studies, to participate in seminars and colloquia, to be exposed to new subjects of scholarship and diverse methodological approaches. I hope to present my research and receive feedback, suggestions, and possibilities for improvement and innovation. I hope to contribute some of the knowledge and expertise that I have gained in Israel to the development and revitalization of scholarship and teaching in the institution that I would have the privilege of visiting.

My aspiration is that following my time in the United States, I would join the faculty of a Biblical Studies department in a university in Israel. The abilities, expertise, and methodological approaches that I will gain in the United States, together with the professional connections and acquaintance with the most important scholars and central research institutions will assist me in becoming a better scholar and lecturer; one who is more productive, and provides a greater contribution to Israeli academic culture, strengthening the firm and essential connection between these two centers of scholarship.

### Duration

I intend to remain in the United States for a period of one to two years, depending on the funding that will be available to me, as well as other personal and professional factors. I estimate that the proposed course of research will take two years. In the first year, I intend to complete the article on the Ark of the Covenant, as well as an article on incense. In parallel to work on these two articles, I will engage in in-depth study of the theoretical scholarly literature on the meaning of ritual, the role of myth, and the relationship between them in the Bible and in general. By the end of the first year, I hope to publish a theoretical-methodological article, dealing with the connection between theory of myth and theory of ritual from the field of Religious Studies and Biblical Studies in a philological-historical approach. This article will present several foundational concepts and insights that will assist me and other scholars in examining similar questions, and will allow other scholars to use my insights, and of course disagree with and improve them as well. In the second year, I will write the two additional articles, on circumcision and the name of God, and depending on their progress, I will edit the monograph which will include versions of the four articles on each of the subjects that I have presented, as well as the methodological article which will become the introductory or concluding chapter of the monograph.