The Journal of Theological Studies, 2024, **XX**, 1–18
https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flae063
Advance access publication 3 September 2024
Article

OXFORD

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

Anatomizing God?

R. W. L. Moberly

Durham University, UK

r.w.l.moberly@durham.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This essay analyses Francesca Stavrakopoulou's *God: An Anatomy* with reference to some general questions about the nature of biblical interpretation. Stavrakopoulou's core contention is that Persian-period theological editing has obscured the original nature of Yahweh, who was not different from any other ancient male deity of southwest Asia. That is, Yahweh was bodily with the desires and practices of a violent and sexually active male, no more than a human projection. Four questions are put to her thesis. First, how well does she understand the kind of classic theological reading which she rejects? Secondly, is her outworking of her core thesis self-consistent, or does it function to warrant a distinctive reading strategy for what has not been editorially obscured but is rather the plain sense of the biblical text? Thirdly, does she do justice to the metaphorical dimensions of language in Hebrew and religious language generally? Fourthly, does she appropriately distinguish the nature of Israel's scriptures from the religious history that may underlie them? Finally, an analogy is drawn with the work of Robin Lane Fox, in exploring the differences that an interested approach may, or may not, make to ancient historical and biblical interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Works of biblical scholarship today tend to pass unnoticed in the mainstream press and media, as secularized Western culture has generally lost interest in the Bible (other than as a source of certain images and tropes). There are, however, occasional exceptions. Robert Alter's annotated translation of the Hebrew Bible, which readably and thoughtfully in effect commends the Hebrew Scriptures as Judaism's formative contribution to Western civilization, is one.[1] Another, which is the focus of my interest here, is Francesca Stavrakopoulou's 2021 book, *God: An Anatomy*,[2] whose 2022 paperback edition carries back-cover commendations from *The Economist* Books of the Year, the *New York Times*, the *Sunday Times*, and the *New Statesman*, while on the front cover the top line is 'As heard on Radio 4' and also (in more recent paperback

I am grateful to the Thinklings for helpful comments on a first draft of this essay.

[1] *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (3 vols.; New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

[2] London: Picador, 2021. References to the pagination will be in parentheses in my main text.

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

editions) 'Winner of the PEN Hessell-Tiltman Prize' and 'Shortlisted for the Wolfson History Prize'. This is biblical scholarship that has made waves.

There are at least three factors that contribute to the book's impact.[3] First, Stavrakopoulou, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Religion at Exeter University, knows how to write. The prose is lucid, flowing, accessible, and sardonically witty. Each chapter begins with a vivid narrative sketch to draw the reader in to the content of the discussion. Biblical scholarship is rarely so entertaining.

Secondly, it is a work of considerable learning. Alongside the biblical text, the reader becomes familiarized with an extensive array of the texts and artefacts of the ancient world more generally, many of which are illustrated in consistently high-quality figures (57 in total) and colour-plate photographs (33 in total). There is also widespread interaction with the literature and art of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation down the ages (some of which also feature in the figures and photographs).

Thirdly, it is a polemic, and a well-written and widely researched polemic can make for a certain *frisson* in its reading.[4] There are novel, startling, and unprecedented readings of the biblical text.[5] Although 'polemic' is my term, rather than Stavrakopoulou's, I do not think she would deny it. She is up front from the start: 'I've never believed in God, but religion has always intrigued me' (p. 1). At university she was increasingly bemused by the broad assumption that the God of the Bible is without a body, and so without sex or gender. When confronted by biblical texts that appear to depict otherwise, she was told, 'The problem only arises when we take the Bible's descriptions too literally'. But this would not do: 'Everyone else in the room seemed remarkably content with this approach to the God of the Bible, but I found it deeply frustrating. Why *should* I look past the clear image of God as a gigantic man with a heavy tread, weapons in his hands and breath as hot as sulphur?' (p. 3). Frustration, however, led to a moment when 'it suddenly dawned on me. Everyone else in the room, my theology professor included, was censoring the Bible, sanitizing its deity of any mythological, earthy or unsettling characteristics. I was disappointed by them. And disappointed for them' (pp. 3–4). That moment of dawning has borne fruit in this book, which is 'the book I'd have liked to read when I was at university. It tells the story of the real God of the Bible, in all his corporeal, uncensored, scandalous forms … this book disentangles the biblical God from his scriptural and doctrinal fetters to reveal a deity wholly unlike the God worshipped by Jews and Christians today' (p. 4). The last line of the book neatly sums up its consistent thesis, that the deity of the Bible was 'a god made in our own image' (p. 423). As such Stavrakopoulou stands in a long line of notable polemicists against Christianity—from Celsus and Porphyry in antiquity, via Enlightenment sceptics, be they atheists such as Pierre Bayle or deists such as Thomas Payne, to contemporary celebrity atheists, of whom Richard Dawkins is probably the best known.

In this essay I want to reflect on Stavrakopoulou's thesis in relation to some wider considerations about the nature of biblical interpretation.

2. STAVRAKOPOULOU'S THESIS

Stavrakopoulou's core thesis is twofold. First: in the time of ancient Israel, Israel's deity was not in any significant way different from any other deities of ancient southwest Asia;[6] he, like they,

[3] One might also gesture towards broader cultural factors, such as extensive intellectual alienation from historic Christianity, and openness to notions of Christian cover-up such as were famously popularized in Dan Brown's 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.

[4] Some readers, especially believing/observant Christians and Jews who operate outside the conventions of scholarly discourse, may depict Stavrakopoulou's work in more negative terms.

[5] Some of Stavrakopoulou's readings do have some precedent, as duly recorded in her endnotes. Her overall approach, working sequentially upwards through the various parts of the divine anatomy—Part I: Feet and Legs; Part II: Genitals; Part III: Torso; Part IV: Arms and Hands; Part V: Head—is entirely unprecedented.

[6] She resists the familiar terminology of 'ancient near East' as 'Western-centric and freighted with colonial baggage' (p. ix).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

was corporeal with all the functions, desires, and practices that are associated with the familiar human body, only on a grander scale. All ancient deities were comparable mythic projections of the human. She formulates this core contention with a flourish:

> He [Yahweh] was just like any other deity in the ancient world. He had a head, hair, and a face; eyes, ears, a nose and a mouth. He had arms, hands, legs and feet, and a chest and a back. He was equipped with a heart, a tongue, teeth and genitals. He was a god who breathed, in and out. This was a deity who not only looked like a human—albeit on a far more impressive, glamourous scale—but who very often behaved like a human. He enjoyed evening strolls and hearty meals; he listened to music, wrote books and made lists. He was a god who not only spoke, but whistled, laughed, shouted, wept and talked to himself. He was a god who fell in love and into fights; a god who squabbled with his worshippers and grappled with his enemies; a god who made friends, raised children, took wives and had sex. (p. 11)

A reader might perhaps object that although certain of those attributes (e.g. face, hands, feet) have some obvious recognizable basis in the biblical text, there are many that do not, and so the portrayal as a whole does not ring true. So the second aspect of the thesis is no less important:

> None of these texts have reached us in their 'original' form. Instead, all were subject to creative and repeated revision, addition, emendation and editing across a number of generations, reflecting the shifting ideological interests of their curators, who regarded them as sacred writings.
>
> It is this long process of creative curation that has given narrative shape to the biblical story of God's relationship with 'Israel', the people in whom he takes a special interest. (p. 12)

What we now read is not how it was originally. Stavrakopoulou does indeed allow that 'readers of the Bible might be surprised' by her account of 'Yahweh's early career': 'After all, the ancient editorial voices dominating the biblical portrayal of the past insist on a competing, alternative story [to that which she outlines], in which it is claimed that, from the beginning, God was only ever a solitary, unchanging deity, devoid of divine colleagues; a universal being in exclusive command of the cosmos, its course and its creatures'. But the rejoinder, as she continues, is simple: 'This story is a product of a later theological worldview—and its narrative of religious history is unreliable' (p. 25). The key period for this transformation is reckoned to be the Persian era, from the late sixth or early fifth century onwards, when in a restored Jerusalem 'literary activities [gave] rise to the texts of the Hebrew Bible as we find them today' (p. 14); an 'elite group' rebuilt the temple and 'in remaking their temple, they also remade their religion' (p. 152); and so the theologies of 'priests and temple personnel… came to dominate much of the Bible' (p. 318).

At the outset Stavrakopoulou appeals to the famous case of the Greek intellectual Xenophanes who found fault with Homer for attributing unworthy human behaviour to the gods, and objected to what he read because of his 'philosophically driven insistence that a god was inherently and necessarily a being "in no way like mortals either in body or thought"' (p. 9). On Stavrakopoulou's reckoning, the Persian era in Jerusalem had Hebrew-speaking counterparts to Xenophanes, who found problematic what had not been a problem for earlier generations. If we try to imagine what Homer might look like if Xenophanes and others had had time and opportunity to work over his text, and bring it more into line with their own conceptions (though the Homeric texts in fact remained unaltered), then we have some idea of the nature of the Hebrew Bible in Stavrakopoulou's judgement.

She does not, as far as I can see, observe that this makes the biblical texts unparalleled for their apparent combination of an ancient original with a later massive and differently oriented

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

rewriting. Nor does she reflect on an issue that might merit fuller attention—that is, how difficult it would be to carry out such rewriting with apparent plausibility. One would surely expect such a rewriting to be regularly jagged and awkward, as the later ideology would have struggled to mitigate the earlier material from which it had become so distanced. One would not expect the result to appear organic and integrated (whatever puzzles there might be along the way)—which, rightly or wrongly, is how it has appeared to the majority of its readers down the ages, even though of course some readers, especially in the context of modern biblical scholarship, have indeed found it problematic. Stavrakopoulou's task, in the light of contemporary scholarship, is to show the implausibility of this Persian-period 'cover-up' and to expose the ancient original—'we can meet the real God of the Bible' (p. 25)—however unpalatable to some Jews and Christians this may be.

3. POLEMICS, INTERESTED READING, AND DISCIPLINED INTERPRETATION

There is a curious and persistent debate within biblical scholarship, as to whether the belief of a practising/observant Jewish or Christian scholar, if not bracketed out but rather utilized to inform their work, disqualifies them from the dispassionate critical and historical thinking that is meant to be the mark of true scholarship. Stavrakopoulou seems to touch on this trope in her 'Author's Note', when she says that, although biblical quotations follow the NRSV, 'I have modified its (confessional) translation where necessary' (p. ix). The apparent implication is that a confessional approach may prejudge or skew, while her non/anti-confessional rendering will deliver the real meaning of the text.

I call the debate curious, because the postmodern turn of recent years has helped clarify what has always been the case: that the stance and perspective of a scholar, itself usually embedded in the wider social nature of knowledge, always makes a difference to the work they do. There is no view from nowhere, but we all view what we study, in this case the Bible, from somewhere, and that somewhere makes a difference to the questions we ask and the answers that satisfy. The non-believer is hardly more immune than the believer to potentially skewing what they read in the light of how they read it.

The fact that Stavrakopoulou's work is a polemic, and that she is an interested party in what she writes, need, however, no more be an in-principle problem than that many Jewish and Christians scholars also come to the Bible as interested parties: we think it worthwhile to study the Bible because of inhabiting a contemporary tradition of active faith in God for which the Bible is foundational. Indeed, for those who, like me, want to ask specifically about the inherent meaning of the biblical portrayals of God and humanity alongside questions about their interpretation and possible appropriation in contemporary faith and life, the interested nature of what we do needs to be fully acknowledged.

What enables interested biblical scholarship to be good scholarship? It must be the quality of the work, which arises out of making one's own the *discipline* of scholarship. Apart from mastery of the ancient languages (arguably one of the things that most distinguishes the biblical scholar from the general reader), not only does one need wide and deep reading and comprehension, a deep imaginative grasp of the subject matter, and care in what one says and how one says it. One also needs to acknowledge possible difficulties in one's material, possible alternative construals, possible limits as to what can be said with confidence. It is on this issue of scholarly discipline that I wish to push back against Stavrakopoulou.

Put differently, there are two kinds of critique. One is work that so understands that which it critiques that it makes an unchanged holding of that position untenable once the critique is understood (Old Testament scholars may think here of the enduring impact of Wellhausen's

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

Prolegomena). The other is work that, because of its erudition and presentation, sounds persuasive to the general non-specialist reader but is in fact undisciplined and unpersuasive to those who know the field. Stavrakopoulou purports to offer the former, but I will contend that in significant ways, at least with regard to biblical interpretation, she offers the latter.

For example, in a chapter on Israel's deity's 'Sensational Feet', we read:

> For Yahweh … walking … was an opportunity for amiable, male companionship … It may be that companionship was Yahweh's goal when he went for his evening stroll in the Garden of Eden, for as he walks, he is on the lookout for Adam. But Adam is nowhere to be seen. 'Where are you?' he calls out, like the frustrated loser in a game of hide-and-seek (*and laying to rest any idea that the God of the Bible is omniscient and omnipotent*). (p. 72, italics added)

Although the apparent quest for male companionship and the envisaged tone of voice (both characteristic of Stavrakopoulou's mode of reading, about which more will be said later) are open to alternative readings, it is the comment in parentheses, clearly envisaged as a quick hit on an easy target—no doubt appealing to a general non-specialist readership—which is particularly revealing.

First, Stavrakopoulou seems to think that Christian theology in relation to the Bible is formulated, or can be overturned, by some kind of proof-texting. However, a Christian understanding of God's omniscience and omnipotence, while indeed rooted in Scripture, is rooted in a reading of Scripture as a whole, as an attempt to formulate its core tenor and thrust. Particular individual passages or verses may feature significantly within this (e.g. Psalm 139, Gen. 1:1), but in themselves they are not decisive. Moreover, the theological doctrines of omniscience and omnipotence can readily accommodate particular verses that do not appear to envisage that which the doctrines affirm.[7] A telling critique needs to understand how that which is critiqued actually operates.

Secondly, it is odd to take a passing detail in a dramatic mythic narrative as having the weight that Stavrakopoulou ascribes to it. To be sure, the point of the Eden narrative is contested, with many proposals in the literature. Nonetheless, I have yet to come across the proposal that the story is about divine knowledge or ignorance. Even with reference to God, in such a narrative dramatic detail may precisely be dramatic detail.

Thirdly, Stavrakopoulou seems not to allow that any reading of the divine question, other than as expressing ignorance, is possible. (This typifies a recurrent feature of her handling of the biblical text throughout the book, that she consistently affirms her reading as *the* reading, with no recognition of possible semantic openness, interpretive complexity, or the possible strength of alternative readings.) Yet questions vary in nature and purpose. Consider the questions of trial lawyers, who ask questions to which they already know, or intuit, the answer. In the very next story, Yahweh says to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' (Gen. 4:9). When Cain responds evasively, Yahweh continues, 'What have you done? The sound of your brother's shed blood is crying to me from the ground'. Yahweh clearly knows from the outset where Abel is and what Cain has done to him. His questions are not to express his ignorance but to get Cain talking about the murder. The question in Gen. 3:9 is hardly different. In relation to both Adam and Cain, Yahweh's questions are surely exactly in the mode of the trial lawyer, to engage with a culpable, and each time unsurprisingly evasive, person over what they have done and are known to have done.

[7] This doctrinal issue is most obvious with reference to the Trinity, which is an attempt to articulate the deep grammar and logic of the New Testament language about Father, Son, and Spirit. Scholars who affirm the doctrine of the Trinity fully acknowledge that no New Testament writer thought in what later became 'trinitarian' terms, and that there are passages whose prima facie sense can be a problem for the doctrine.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

When Stavrakopoulou's quick and easy shot in fact fails to hit the target, the reader who is not simply carried along by her confident rhetoric may not unreasonably question how well she really understands the object of her polemic.

To develop my concern about appropriate discipline in biblical scholarship, in the next three sections I will put particular questions to Stavrakopoulou's mode of reading the biblical text and to the working assumptions that underlie and inform her readings.

4. EDITORIAL REWORKING AND READING STRATEGY

First and foremost, I am puzzled as to how the two key elements of Stavrakopoulou's thesis—the bodily nature and practices of Israel's deity like any other ancient southwest Asian deity, alongside the ideological rewriting and obscuring of this in the Persian period—relate to her actual handling of the biblical text. I would have expected to be presented with constant differentiations within the text between the older, original portrayal and the markers of its later ideological reworking that now 'dominate' the received portrayal. For if the biblical text is *ex hypothesi* a composite of markedly different conceptions of deity, with a late conception laid upon though not entirely displacing an earlier, the showing of how this is so to those for whom it is not self-evident would surely be the prime interpretive task. Yet after the first chapter, where the two elements of her thesis are set out (in a way that is indebted to fashionable but not unquestionable hypotheses about the developments of Israel's religion and literature), such differentiating analysis is consistently absent from her readings of the text. (And if such analysis might be considered off-putting to a prospective non-specialist reader, one would expect that the endnotes would contain at least brief and indicative analyses in support of her contentions.) What we are given, however, is a reading of the biblical text *as it stands* in such a way as to show that *the supposed real and original nature of Israel's deity is consistently present*. That is, apparently the ancient original still stares the reader in the face, despite its supposedly extensive rewriting.

In other words, the appeal to a Persian-period rewrite functions not to enable the separating of older layers from later reworkings but rather *to warrant a particular reading strategy*, which is marked by its differentiation from classic Jewish and Christian reading strategies in terms of its framing assumptions. In essence (as already seen), references to Yahweh's body and practices in the text, which traditional interpreters have been inclined to read metaphorically, are instead to be taken 'literally'. Or, more generally, Stavrakopoulou's strategy amounts to: when the text says 'Yahweh' then think 'bodily alpha-male deity of a regularly violent and predatory disposition'. She distances herself from the unsatisfactory mode of reading characterized by her university professor, and in its place offers her own alternative. This alternative, although idiosyncratic, is nonetheless recognizably informed not only by extensive historical knowledge of ancient religious literature and artefacts, but also by contemporary feminist and postcolonial perspectives, which at times add a certain moral passion to her account. How does it work in practice?

Four representative examples will, I hope, clarify the nature of Stavrakopoulou's reading strategy and its problematic relationship to her basic thesis of rewriting and cover-up. A first example is in the chapter on 'Headstrong Beauty' where she discusses not only Yahweh's good looks but also his being attracted to the good looks of others:

> Not that Yahweh's own head had never been turned by the godlike beauty of a good-looking man. Having seen that the young shepherd-boy David was 'ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was good-looking', Yahweh promptly decided to set him up as king: 'Anoint him; this is the one' [with endnote reference to 1 Sam. 16:12]. God was not the only one to fall for the beautiful young man … [there follows mention of Michal and Jonathan]. (p. 339)

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

The regular reader, who has an open Bible alongside Stavrakopoulou's book, may be puzzled by this. On the one hand, the text says nothing about the deity 'having his head turned' or 'falling for' David's beauty. So this has to be a case where the reader, once liberated from traditional assumptions about Israel's deity and instead adopting Stavrakopoulou's reading strategy, can see that the real meaning implied in the text has to be that David's beauty is mentioned to account for the sexually alert deity's choice of him. On the other hand, there is an obvious objection, that the text itself has already ruled out Stavrakopoulou's reading earlier in the same story via the axiom in 1 Sam. 16:7, 'humans look on outward appearance, but Yahweh looks on the heart', of which she makes no mention.

Many pages later, however, Stavrakopoulou returns to this episode. Initially, she simply reiterates her previous reading: 'when the gorgeous teenaged David caught Yahweh's eye, the deity's head was easily turned' (p. 383). In the next paragraph, however, she deals with the previously ignored difficulty:

> Of course, Yahweh denied that David was chosen to replace Saul solely because of his looks. What was on the inside counted too: 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature', Yahweh had said to Samuel … 'Yahweh does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks on the heart', the deity had claimed [with endnote reference to 1 Sam. 16:7]. God's X-ray vision gave him a piercing insight into whomever he chose to probe. (p. 383)

This is a striking reading in two ways, both related to a subtly suggested hermeneutic of suspicion. On the one hand, Stavrakopoulou's choice of words—'Of course, Yahweh denied' and 'the deity had claimed'—deftly implies that the deity's words are not to be taken at face value, for the deity (in the biblical writer's portrayal) wants to save face and deny his real reason for choosing David. On the other hand, her implication of 'not only outward appearance but also inner reality' clearly does not represent what the text says, for the text's plain sense is '*not at all* outward appearance *but only* inner reality' as the grounds for the divine choice; and the subsequent reference to David's good looks would nicely serve to make the point that if good looks are no ground for the divine choice, they neither preclude it nor are they incompatible with it. I presume that Stavrakopoulou does not want to go with the plain sense of the text because of her thesis of a cover-up of Yahweh's original nature.

Two points of principle. First, Stavrakopoulou offers no argument that 1 Sam. 16:7, which at face value denies her reading, is a late Persian-period addition to an earlier story that originally read otherwise. This may be in part because such an argument would be circular and implausible in a story that straightforwardly reads as a literary unity (1 Sam. 16:1–13), in which v.7 has always been recognized as central to the story as a whole. We are not given an account of a late reworking of an early, and differently oriented, original, as her core thesis might have led us to expect. Rather, it is a matter of reading the text as a whole, as it stands, with an appropriate reading strategy, i.e. a hermeneutic of suspicion which penetrates the text to reveal what was *really* going on: once one recognizes that Israel's deity was no different in his bodily desires from any other ancient deity, such desires should be recognized as present in the text, even if the text does not say so, and even denies it.

Secondly, such a hermeneutic of suspicion on an ancient text in effect irresistibly sweeps all before it, in a 'heads I win, tails you lose' kind of way. For textual evidence that is contrary to Stavrakopoulou's thesis is discounted with 'he would say that, wouldn't he'. Evaluation of a textual reading on standard philological grounds becomes impossible, because if something in the text contradicts the reading offered, it is set aside as special pleading which the knowing reader can see through. This puts enormous weight on acceptance of the initial and ruling premiss

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

about the nature of Israel's deity which directs the reading strategy—a premiss which, ironically, comes to play a role analogous to that of the theological assumptions ('doctrinal fetters') of her university professor which she found so problematic.

A second example is Stavrakopoulou's reading of Hos. 2:14–15 [Heb. 16–17], where Yahweh speaks of renewing his relationship with Israel, envisaged as a woman (and of course prophetic depictions of Israel as a woman have become contentious at a time of high contemporary sensitivity over issues of gender and sexuality). The NRSV reads:

> Therefore, I will now allure [Heb. *pth*, Piel] her,
> and bring her into the wilderness,
> and speak tenderly to her …
> There she shall respond [Heb. ʿ*nh*, Qal] as in the days of her youth,
> as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

Although this might seem straightforward language of renewed courtship, Stavrakopoulou sees this as depicting God as 'a powerful sexual predator'. Crucial is her rendering of the two Hebrew verbs I have noted in parentheses. She translates: 'I will now seduce her … I will take her walking into the wilderness … and there she will cry out'. In relation to 'seduce' she comments that God 'uses a Hebrew expression more usually employed in the Bible to describe the rape of captive women'. Moreover, 'in describing Israel's vocal response, he [i.e. God] uses a term that can convey both the noise of sexual gratification and religious joy. God's dangerous sense of sexual entitlement skews his planned attack on the girl into the distorted conviction that she will enjoy her rape—and scream in orgasmic ecstasy' (pp. 156–7). Apparently the text depicts not renewed courtship but a divine rapist's fantasy.

As with the previous example, there is no argument for a reworked text with different levels; rather, the plain sense is apparently there for the reader with eyes to see, once alerted to the true nature of Yahweh's original character. But how plain is this sense? The first verb, *p-t-h* (Piel), is not very common, and has a range of meanings, primarily 'treat someone as simple', and thus sometimes 'deceive'.[8] It can apparently mean sexual seduction.[9] It is twice used as an imperative by Philistines who urge one of Samson's women to get information out of him (Judg. 14:15, 16:5), where although the means of getting the information might well be sexual, the point could be primarily about lulling or tricking Samson into revealing the desired information. In Hos. 2:14 the verb is usually understood positively, as NRSV's 'allure', because of its accompaniment by 'speak tenderly to her'.[10] Despite Stavrakopoulou's claim about how the verb is 'more usually employed', she cites no biblical reference in her endnotes, and there is no uncontested example of her proposed use.

The second verb, ʿ*-n-h*, is very common, and usually means 'answer' or 'respond'. In context, the renewal of a relationship, after a breakdown and estrangement, through responsive speaking with each other, makes excellent sense. There is, however, the potential complication that the verbal root ʿ*-n-h* has several homonymous forms, whose meanings vary and likely include 'sing' (Exod. 15:21). In support of her proposed reading, Stavrakopoulou's endnote contains reference to Mayer Gruber's commentary on Hosea, which indeed unprecedentedly proposes to read ʿ*-n-h* in Hos. 2:15 as 'call out in ecstasy'/'call out (at the moment of orgasm)', albeit in a positive context of enjoying a renewed honeymoon.[11] Gruber bases this almost entirely on

[8] As Joab accuses Abner, in his absence, to David (2 Sam. 3:25).

[9] So Exod. 22:16 [Heb. 15], with reference to a man and unmarried woman. But it should be noted that *p-t-h* here is followed by 'lie with', and so on its own here does not indicate sexual action, but rather the preliminary persuasion of the woman.

[10] The Hebrew idiom is 'speak to the heart' (*dibber* ʿ*al lēv*), which is most famously used in Isa. 40:2 in the context of comforting Jerusalem.

[11] Mayer I. Gruber, *Hosea: A Textual Commentary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 147.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

Exod. 32:18, which is in fact an interpretive crux.[12] But even if Gruber's construal of sexual sound be allowed in Exod. 32:18b, it cannot be readily transferred to Hos. 2:15. Not only in Exod. 32:18b is the form of the verb Piel while in Hos. 2:15 the form is Qal, but in Exod. 32:18b the Piel meaning is explicitly differentiated from the two Qal uses that precede in 32:18a. Gruber simply ignores the differing forms of the verb, and so provides no firm foundation for Stavrakopoulou to build on.

What Stavrakopoulou argues for in relation to Israel's deity, she also argues, *mutatis mutandis*, in relation to human figures. So my third example comes from a wide-ranging argument that she makes, to the effect that 'the erotic overtones of [certain] biblical episodes are often missed by modern readers unfamiliar with the cultural contours of the ancient world' (p. 84). As a specific example, following an initial claim that for a better understanding of Jesus' washing his disciples' feet (John 13), we should realize that 'for the earliest followers of Jesus, steeped in Jewish traditions, the feet were already eroticized and closely associated with sexual activity', she moves to a consideration of an episode in the book of Ruth. She introduces this with the well-recognized point that 'in the Hebrew Bible, they [i.e. feet] often serve euphemistically as a stand-in for genitalia' (pp. 84–5). In the light of this, she offers a reading of the episode of Ruth and Boaz one night at a threshing floor (Ruth 3). Here Ruth 'is instructed by her dead husband's mother to seduce the landowner Boaz by oiling herself with perfume, uncovering his "feet" while he's asleep and positioning herself there. ("And then he will tell you what to do", her mother-in-law adds, with the voice of experience.) Ruth remains at Boaz's "feet" all night, *and succeeds in conceiving a child* [with endnote reference to Ruth 3:3–14; 4:11–17; italics added]' (p. 85). Or, as Stavrakopoulou puts it in a subsequent mention of the story, Ruth 'urges a sleepy Boaz to have sex with her by spreading the corner of his cloak over her [with endnote reference to Ruth 3:9]' (p. 157).

As always, Stavrakopoulou reads confidently, without acknowledgement of possible alternative construals. It is indeed possible to read the story as envisaging sex at the threshing floor. Two caveats, however, may be put to her reading.[13] First, as she recognizes, although 'feet' often indicate genitalia, they do not always do so; 'feet' may mean actual feet. One needs, of course, to determine contextually which sense is most appropriate. Likewise, although the idiom of 'spreading the corner of your cloak [Hebrew 'wing']' could be a euphemism for sexual intercourse, it could also be an idiom for formal betrothal (which is the issue that Boaz directly addresses in his words to Ruth).[14] Here it is not easy to determine the sense of either idiom, for a striking feature of the encounter between Ruth and Boaz is the narrator's reticence. It is possible to imagine Ruth lying at the soles of Boaz's actual feet, in a mode analogous to that of a suppliant. Hebrew has three common idioms for sexual intercourse, 'go into' (*bōʾ el*), 'lie with' (*shākav ʿīm*),[15] and 'know' (*yadaʿ*), none of which is used here. The account focuses entirely on

[12] What does Moses hear the Israelites doing after making the golden calf? The MT has a play on words between *ʿ-n-h* (Qal) in the first two clauses of 32:18a (which Gruber renders reasonably as 'It is not the sound of singing about victory, and it is not the sound of singing about defeat') and *ʿ-n-h* (Piel) in the third clause of 32:18b, which indicates some kind of special noise or singing different from the first two (which Gruber renders 'it is the sound of engaging in a sexual orgy that I hear'). Gruber's rendering is possible, when taken in conjunction with the depiction of Israel with the verb *ts-ḥ-q* in Exodus 32:6, a verb which can have sexual connotations (Gen. 26:8, 39:14); but Gruber's reading can only rank as 'possible', hardly 'probable'. There is also no support from the ancient versions. In rendering the third *ʿ-n-h* the Septuagint mentions wine, while the Vulgate interprets it as 'singing'.

[13] Stavrakopoulou's parenthetical comment about Naomi's instruction to Ruth as a sexually 'knowing' instruction that arises from Naomi's 'voice of experience' is arguably gratuitous since Ruth, as a widow, would already have been sexually experienced.

[14] The idiom is also used in Ezek. 16:8. Usually it is understood in terms of the social and economic security of marriage, but Stavrakopoulou takes it in a more graphic sexual sense. The words in themselves, being metaphorical, are open to more than one construal.

[15] Although obviously only men could be the subject of the verb in the first idiom, women as well as men could be the subject of 'lie with', as in the case of Lot's daughters (Gen. 19:32–5), if it was significant to portray a female initiative—which would arguably be the situation if Ruth initiated sexual intercourse.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

what Boaz says to Ruth, not what he does with her.[16] Overall, the literary presentation of Ruth and Boaz is ambiguous. The narrator's clear reticence, however, does not feature in Stavrakopoulou's reading. It raises the question of when a claim to show what was really going on may be a matter of trampling on literary finesse.

Secondly, Stavrakopoulou clearly implies that Ruth becomes pregnant as a result of the threshing-floor encounter. Although she has an endnote references to Ruth 4:11–17, she makes no mention of the narrator's explicit account that Ruth only conceived her son Obed, the grandfather of David, not as a result of the night at the threshing floor but as a result of sex subsequent to marriage with Boaz (and with divine enabling): 'So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and he went into her (*bōʾ el*), and Yahweh gave her conception and she bore a son' (4:13). One would have more confidence that Stavrakopoulou's reading is genuinely reclaiming an understanding that characterized the ancient world, if she discussed difficulties for her reading posed by the text which she references, even if only via appeal to possible different versions of the story.

We find a similar approach to the New Testament as to the Old Testament, whence I take my fourth example. Here Stavrakopoulou makes no claim for the kind of reworking supposed to characterize Israel's scriptures, but still makes comparable interpretive moves. When, for example, the archangel Gabriel tells Mary that she will become pregnant, Stavrakopoulou comments: 'The extent to which she has any choice about the matter is far from ambiguous. "Here I am, the slave of the Lord" … Contrary to centuries of Christian teaching, this is no joyful assent. Describing herself as a "slave" (*doule*), Mary articulates not her willingness to be impregnated, but her powerlessness to object' (p. 410). This unusual reading of Mary's words (based on an underlying assumption that the deity is predatory and forces himself on women?) would be more persuasive as bringing out the text's real meaning if two obvious objections were raised and dealt with. On the one hand, 'slave/servant of Yahweh/Christ' (*ʿeved yhwh*, *doulos christou*) is consistently regarded as an honorific term both in the Old Testament (e.g. Isa. 42:1, 53:13) and in the New Testament, where Paul resonantly affirms his identity as *doulos* not only to Christ (Rom. 1:1, Gal. 1:10) but also to other people (2 Cor. 4:5). On the other hand, Mary's next recorded words are 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour' (Luke 1:46). If Mary's stated joy, as the narrative continues, is not to be taken at face value, it would be helpful to know why.

5. THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Stavrakopoulou begins a discussion of divine feet and footprints with discussion, and photo, of large divine footprints at an Iron Age temple in 'Ain Dara in norther Syria. 'Its structure and iconography map so precisely onto the biblical description of Solomon's temple, it is as though they shared the same divine blueprint' (p. 29). Moreover, 'footprints signalled the permanent presence of the god within. It is this sense of material presence that lies at the heart of ancient ideas about deities. The perceived reality of the gods was bound up with the notion that for anything or anyone to exist—and persist—is to be present and placed in some tangible form'. So 'the footprints at 'Ain Dara … marked the exact place of the deity with the world of humans' (p. 30).

[16] One possible factor to take into account for interpretation is that there are some resonances between the story of Ruth and the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, which are the only two narratives in Israel's scriptures in which Levirate marriage is an issue. Judah has sex with an unrecognized Tamar; and Ruth, at night, was initially unrecognized by Boaz. But even though Tamar is praised by Judah as 'more in the right than I', because of his attempted evasion of his Levirate responsibility, Tamar's sexual self-offering to Judah is not considered a good in itself, and is hardly a clear precedent for, or analogy to, Ruth.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

Israel's scriptures indeed speak of their deity's feet, not least in relation to the Jerusalem temple. Isa. 60:13 speaks of the bringing of offerings 'to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify where my feet rest', while Ezek. 43:7 depicts Ezekiel's hearing about a renewed temple, 'this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever'.[17] A similarity to the Syrian temple seems clear. 'Like the deity at 'Ain Dara in Syria, whose footprints were set in stone as they strode into their temple, the permanence of Yahweh's presence in the Jerusalem temple was made manifest by his feet'. So, in summary: 'When the God of the Bible had declared the Jerusalem temple to be the place for the soles of his feet, he meant it literally' (p. 49).

It is this 'literally', used as an apparently straightforward term, that gives pause and raises my next question. I wonder: did Homer think that Zeus and Hera (and others) were literally present on Mt Olympus, and did the priests of Ugarit think that El and Baal (and others) were literally present on Mt Zaphon? Stavrakopoulou's use of 'literally' nicely highlights a striking absence in her book. At no point is there any discussion of the nature of language in general, or Hebrew language or religious language in particular; nor of the ways in which language can, and cannot, express people's affect and experience. Yet metaphor is intrinsic to ordinary everyday language as well as to religious language, and most people (except, perhaps, the autistic) use it intuitively and spontaneously.

In general philological terms, one might expect Stavrakopoulou to acknowledge the relative lack of abstract nouns in biblical Hebrew, and hence the common use of body parts in extended and metaphorical senses with respect to humans as well as deity. The 'hand', for example, can depict agency, as when Yahweh speaks 'by the hand of' Moses (Exod. 9:35); or it can depict power, as when Reuben hopes to deliver Joseph from his brothers' 'hand' (Gen. 37:21, 22). Or the 'face' can denote presence—and indeed there is no other term in biblical Hebrew for the notion of presence. Yet she does not discuss such common idiomatic usage for these and other body parts, or the possible implications for her contention that body language when used of the deity should always be taken to indicate actual body parts. She does not advance beyond her opening remarks about the unsatisfactory nature of her theology professor explaining that biblical language should not be taken 'too literally' and 'that those troublesome biblical portrayals of a corporeal, masculine God were simply metaphorical, or poetic'—as though such a verbal and conceptual framework were fully sufficient for the task at hand.[18] She then proceeds to set the bodily, material, and literal *over against* the metaphorical, symbolic, and poetic. I am reminded of C. S. Lewis's observation, in the context of discussing anthropomorphism in Christian theology: 'There is no more tiresome error in the history of thought than to try to sort our ancestors on to this or that side of a distinction which was not in their minds at all'.[19]

Stavrakopoulou appears consistently uneasy with the notion of metaphor, as though it is a form of language that somehow diminishes that of which it speaks, apparently reducing the reality of the 'material' and 'tangible' to the (merely) 'poetic' and 'abstract'. A survey of some of her usage is instructive:

* 'Physically, rather than simply metaphorically, the God of the Bible feels a change of heart' (p. 197). The 'simply' attached to 'metaphorically' suggests that a metaphor would somehow lessen the reality of the 'physical' and diminish the sense of the text.

[17] These two passages are cited/referenced more than once by Stavrakopoulou, in nn. 11 and 12 to p. 32, and n. 20 to p. 39.

[18] It may of course be the case that that teacher used the terms 'literal' and 'metaphorical' casually and unreflectively, and thereby set a bad example.

[19] 'Is Theology Poetry?' in C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces* (London: Fontana, 1965), pp. 41–58, at p. 52.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

* 'Like other rituals, sacrifice was far from a symbolic gesture. It was a loaded, magical performance …' (p. 212). Here a symbol, like a metaphor, apparently cannot convey the reality of a constitutive material practice; and the use of 'gesture', here a dismissively reductive term for the practice of sacrifice, combines to make possible symbolism sound weak and implausible.
* 'The hand of God in the synagogue is simply assumed to be a conventional symbol, rather than a representation of a corporeal deity', whereas 'throughout the Hebrew Bible, the hand of God is presented as a powerful part of God's anatomy' (p. 238). Apparently, if 'hand' is a symbol, then, like a metaphor, it would fail genuinely to speak of the power of a deity imagined in corporeal form.
* Language about worshippers reaching out their hands to Yahweh (with endnote reference to many passages in the psalms and elsewhere), and/or Yahweh holding out his hands in return (with endnote reference to Isa. 65:2) leads Stavrakopoulou to comment: 'To the modern mind, this ritual might seem merely symbolic, or inherently futile—an inevitably empty gesture, as human hands searching for God's touch feel nothing but the gulf between them. But for worshippers across the ancient Levant, the tactility of touch was felt in the action itself' (in relation to seeing and touching a cult image) (pp. 269–70). Apparently if the language is symbolic then it is 'mere', and moreover is equivalent to the 'inherently futile' and the 'inevitably empty', while actual physical touch of a cult image would somehow suffer none of these disadvantages.
* With regard to the psalmists' language of longing to see the face of God, Stavrakopoulou comments that 'it is easy to dismiss the longing to see God's face as mere fantasy', but if it refers to 'look[ing] upon a divine image in a temple', it would be 'to lock eyes with the deity, to see and be seen in the most profound and physical of ways' (pp. 311–12). Apparently, if the language is metaphorical, and does not envisage something 'physical', then it readily qualifies as 'mere fantasy'.

In all this, there appears to be no recognition that metaphor, together with symbol, may be a mode of expression that seeks the better to express a complex reality.

Within this wider conceptual context I want to return to the example of Yahweh's feet being understood to be 'literally' present in the Jerusalem temple. It is unarguable that ancient Israel, and the biblical writers, felt free to imagine their deity in human form, and felt free to use regular human language for this. Many Jews and Christians today still do so, to a greater or lesser extent. But how did they then, and how should we now, understand their language? When the biblical writers imagined their deity in human form and sitting on a throne whose footstool was the Jerusalem temple, they undoubtedly meant that he was 'really' or 'actually' or 'genuinely' present in the temple. If their language was metaphorical, does that necessarily diminish what it is trying to convey, the presence of the divine in a human context?

There is also a particular historical question here, as to whether there was ever a statue of Yahweh in the Jerusalem temple, the feet of which might perhaps be envisaged as the focus for the deity's presence and the worshipper's devotion. The detailed biblical accounts of tabernacle and temple make no mention of any statue (nor of any footprints akin to those at 'Ain Dara). This silence can, of course, be ascribed to a Persian-period reworking of earlier conceptions. Nonetheless Isa. 60:13 likely dates from the Persian period, as may Ezek. 43:7 also. So if these texts speak of the divine feet at a time when in all historical likelihood there was no statue, how is the language to be understood? If it is argued to be use of terminology from an earlier period, one still needs to ask how, if it was still used, that terminology was likely understood. Stavrakopoulou disallows that such language could have been metaphorical in its original usage. Yet according to her theory about the ideological nature of the writing of the Persian period,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

with its rethinking of divine corporeality, metaphor must surely be allowed as a possibility. And, of course, if here, then perhaps also elsewhere.

Let me offer an extended example of this issue of the nature of religious language, as a way of arguing that striking language about the divine body might not unreasonably be considered to be used metaphorically. It is the story of Moses' encounter with God at Sinai, in the aftermath of the making and destroying of the golden calf (Exodus 32), where striking language about both the face and the back of God is used (Exodus 33–4). Stavrakopoulou depicts it thus: Moses's request to see God's 'glory' (Exod. 33:18) is taken to be 'a bold request to see the divine body that has been hidden by thick clouds during the Israelites' trek through the wilderness'. When Yahweh responds that his face will not be seen, but that Moses will see his back, she initially observes that this is 'a capricious assertion, for Yahweh and Moses have already enjoyed a number of conversations "face to face" [i.e. in Exod. 33:11]—and Moses has survived'. She further notes that although 'in the story, this [seeing God's back] is supposed to be a sign of divine favour', in ancient cultural terms 'the back of a god was more usually a devastating sight: it not only signalled divine displeasure, but also presaged definitive disaster', which is 'a body language common to many societies' (p. 169). How then should the display of the divine back to Moses be understood? She offers an ingenious but laboured account, whereby Moses 'sees not the deadly back of God thrust menacingly into the face of an enemy, but the disappearing backside of a celestial celebrity'. This is 'a direct response to Moses' request to behold the divine *kabod* ("glory")', which 'is not the language of grandiose transcendence' but rather 'an explicit request to encounter the very essence of divine corporeality: Moses wants to see God's luminescent, dazzling body'. She concludes with a note at the bottom of the page where she mentions the Septuagint, in which 'Moses' request to see God's body is even more explicit, for Moses says to God not "show me your Glory", but "show yourself to me"' (p. 171).

Four comments. First, the contention that Moses wants to see 'the divine body that has been hidden by thick clouds' in the wilderness is surely a careless reading of the text. The Exodus narrative consistently speaks of the divine presence in terms of a 'cloud' (singular), not 'clouds' (plural). This verbal distinction surely represents a conceptual distinction, that the regular phenomenon of 'clouds' in this context is not what represents, or conceals, the divine presence.[20] Rather, this 'cloud' can also take the form of 'fire' (as at the burning bush), and the difference may be one of visibility, the cloud being visible by day and the fire by night (Exod. 13:21–2). Nor is there any implication that the cloud is 'hiding' a body; rather, the sense of the text is that God appears *as* cloud and fire. In other words, God's presence could be envisaged in non-human, as well as human, form.

Secondly, the denial that Moses would see God's face is undoubtedly surprising after the reference to speaking 'face to face' just a few verses previously. But instead of expressing divine caprice, could it be expressing an intrinsic problem of religious language? How can language express a reality that is greater than ordinary language can readily express (which is a problem with regular human love and/or special moments, as well as with religious language)—in this case the nature of human proximity to the divine? A classic move is simultaneously to affirm and to deny, as, for example, in Eph. 3:19 where there is a prayer 'to *know* the love of Christ *which is beyond knowing*' (my translation and italics). Could the concern of Exodus 33 be to articulate that Moses *sees* the face of God *which is beyond seeing*? That the language of seeing and not seeing the face of God could function in this way both accounts for the text and makes sense.

Thirdly, Stavrakopoulou's interpretation of the divine face and back sits light to the wider narrative context. Israel's paradigmatic faithlessness with the golden calf, which is presented as

[20] The idiom of a singular 'cloud' to represent the divine presence continues in the New Testament also, at both the transfiguration and ascension of Jesus (Matt. 17:5 and parallels, Acts 1:9).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

akin to committing adultery on one's wedding night and so has definitively broken the covenant, gives way to a surprising sequel in which Moses' intercession leads to Yahweh's undertaking to renew the covenant. Here the language of the divine face and back is used. The covering of Moses by the divine hand so that he only sees the divine back emphasizes the *limited* nature of what Moses will see: not the face, which might imply full exposure, but only the back, which is so much less. Yet in the immediately following narrative sequence we have the fullest account of the nature of Yahweh, on the lips of Yahweh, in the whole Bible, on the basis of which the covenant is renewed (Exod. 34:6–7). This extensive account might readily be taken to be a *full* account of Yahweh's name and nature, i.e. the equivalent of seeing the divine face. Yet the contextual preparation for this is that it is *limited*, only the divine back, not the divine face. What if this language is an expression of a classic theological paradox: 'the more of God you know, the more you know you don't know'? Of course, the text speaks in the concrete imagery of face and back, not abstractly. But a reading of the text as the articulation of a conceptual paradox expressed metaphorically via concrete imagery makes full sense in context.

Fourthly, Stavrakopoulou's comment on the Septuagint, that 'show yourself to me' is an explicit request to see God's body, is surely an odd reading of the ancient translators' construal of the biblical narrative. For it would have been the narrative as it now stands that the translators read, and the translators were not averse to translating and interpreting language for God in metaphorical mode. In any case, the clear point of the narrative as it stands is that the request to see God's glory, or self, is indeed answered in what immediately follows, Yahweh's self-revelation as a God of grace and mercy, though also judgement, in Exod. 34:6–7, such that the covenant can be renewed. To encounter Yahweh as gracious and merciful *is* for Moses to see God himself (with the caveat noted in my previous paragraph). It is again a question of the nature of much biblical language, and whether it may not be intrinsically metaphorical. If one sits light to the contention that a request to see God's glory or self should be read as a request to see God's body, one can follow the logic of the narrative's own construal, that to see God's glory, or self, is to encounter him as gracious and merciful, though also demanding, as in 34:6–7.

6. HISTORY OF ISRAELITE RELIGION OR THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Basic to Stavrakopoulou's approach is a strong claim that runs throughout and is formulated at the outset: 'Scholars are agreed that the religious realities of Yahweh worship were far more diverse … than the biblical story asserts'. Indeed, 'To put it bluntly, the Hebrew Bible offers a highly ideological and frequently unreliable portrayal of the past' (p. 14). It is particularly the discovery of non-biblical material in the modern period that 'can also flag the limitations of the Bible's portrayal of the past, warning us that it cannot be taken as a comprehensive or reliable "record" of history' (p. 13).

In particular, she gives much space to the supposed originally sexual nature of Yahweh, in terms of having had a wife and of being sexually active with humans (a mode of deity best known in relation to the Homeric gods). She appeals to certain Hebrew inscriptions, discovered at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom in the 1960s and 1970s, as 'confirming' the role of Asherah as Yahweh's consort (p. 151). These inscriptions contain appeals to, and a blessing from, Yahweh and Asherah or 'Yahweh and his Asherah'. Stavrakopoulou claims that this material 'suggest[s] that most Yahweh worshippers did not share the biblical writers' derogatory view of Asherah. Rather they considered her to be the traditional partner of their high god Yahweh, and they worshipped her as a protective, life-giving goddess, able to mediate blessings to Yahweh's people' (p. 152). Asherah's role, however, was a prime victim of the Persian-period rewrite of Israel's religion: 'Cultural memories of the wife of God were twisted into the theological distortions

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

now evident in the biblical texts in which she appears. Asherah was recast as a toxic idol' (p. 152). Although one might ask whether a few inscriptions suffice to indicate the outlook of 'most' Yahweh worshippers, the bigger question is how to assess the supposed sexual nature of Israel's deity. Stavrakopoulou is in no doubt as to its positive role in ancient mythic understanding:

> The sexualized structuring of the cosmos was as social as it was architectural. In the religious worldviews of ancient south-west Asian cultures, sex was not only procreative and pleasurable, but socially civilizing, binding both the universe and its inhabitants—whether divine or human—into the intense relationships by which life flourished. (p. 153)

Despite the censoring of Asherah, Stavrakopoulou can discern Yahweh's sexual encounters with humans as still present in the text (as already suggested for David in 1 Samuel 16). She makes much of Eve's words in Gen. 4:1b, whose '"literal" translation is "I have procreated a man with Yahweh"' (p. 155). The use on Eve's lips of the Hebrew preposition ʾ*et*, which often means 'with', is a well-known puzzle, usually rendered here as 'with the help of', to try to make sense of it. For Stavrakopoulou, however, such a rendering is 'theologically fudged' because in fact Eve's words are 'pointedly precise: she is claiming that Yahweh has fathered her first child' (p. 155); and, further, this is indicative of 'a long-lost mythic backstory to Eve's character' as originally a 'life-bearing goddess' and 'hence a most suitable sexual partner for a male deity' (p. 156). It would, of course, be helpful to know how she construes the narrator's account that prefaces Eve's words, 'Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain' (Gen. 4:1a), as this could not be more explicit about the human fatherhood of Eve's child. Dismayingly, she is silent, although it is hardly unreasonable for her readers to expect some account of this explicit wording. One must perhaps infer that this textual ruling-out of her construal is part of a later rewrite of the narrative—though such a disallowing of textual evidence on which the narrative depends might be considered to make the argument circular.

In general terms, of course, Stavrakopoulou's contention about the 'unreliable portrayal' of Israel's past is simply a commonplace of much Old Testament scholarship. Nonetheless, it merits some reflection. There is indeed a continuous narrative from creation to the fall of Jerusalem. But why should it be supposed that its purpose ever was to provide a 'comprehensive or reliable record of history', in the terms congenial to ancient historians in today's world? She discounts the significance of the biblical portrayal as it stands, on the grounds that it is 'highly ideological'. But what if this were redescribed? What if the scribal inheritors of the history and traditions of Israel and Judah saw the past as something from which to learn hard-won lessons for the purpose of living and thinking differently in the future, and so presented an account that is indeed rooted in the past but is shaped for didactic purposes for future generations? May it be that common practices on the ground were not considered the best guide to the ways of God, i.e. *vox populi* was not to be taken as *vox Dei*?

Consider, for example, the book of Jeremiah. If one were looking for a 'comprehensive or reliable' account of religious thought and practice in the closing years of the kingdom of Judah, Jeremiah would hardly be the person to turn to. By the book's own account, Jeremiah was unheeded by those to whom he spoke; he was persecuted and regarded as a traitor; and even when events had arguably proved him right, he was still unheeded and carried off to Egypt against his will. He is said to have had one or two friends (Baruch, Ebed-melech, perhaps Ahikam), but for the most part he was a loner, and clearly unrepresentative of what his fellow Judahites were thinking and doing. Yet Jeremiah is the figure whose words and life were preserved and subsequently privileged, not those of his Jerusalemite contemporaries. And if modern scholarly accounts of continuing developments within both the content and the text of the

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

book of Jeremiah are at all on the right lines, it is clear that Jeremiah was a focal figure of interest from, most likely, the end of, or soon after, his life, and remained so for a long time. What if, as a thought experiment, one were to regard much of the other content of the Old Testament as in significant ways comparable to Jeremiah—perhaps unrepresentative of religious thought and practice at the time of origin, yet subsequently recognized to have a wisdom and truth that the original contemporaries did not appreciate? The value and possible truth content of such writings, rooted in and growing out of Israel's history, would have to be evaluated *not* by their proximity to a 'comprehensive or reliable' account of that history, but rather by their moral and religious content, their vision of life under God. And that evaluation could not be properly made apart from also taking seriously the communities of people seeking to live in accord with that vision, and discovering its truth (or lack thereof) experientially over time. Which, at root, brings us to what we know as the early history of what became Judaism, and then Christianity, where authoritative scriptures and shared patterns and practices of life and thought coexisted fruitfully—though of course the evaluation of fruitfulness depends especially on the perspective of those today who inherit those ancient writings and practices and inhabit the living tradition rooted in them.

Another way of putting this is that it may be necessary to draw a major distinction between two different, though not unrelated, things. On the one hand, there is a history of Israelite religion, descriptive and analytical accounts of what happened on the ground generally, in Israel and its neighbours. On the other hand, there is Old Testament/Hebrew Bible theology/theologies, that is the interpretation and understanding of the written accounts, the scriptures, which arise out of that religion and which present a distinctive vision, a vision that was taken as authoritative for access to the reality and priorities of God for ongoing generations.

In relation to the specific issue of a sexually active Yahweh, the question is how to assess—by what criteria?—such a supposed divine sexuality. Here an evaluation of what stands in Israel's scriptures in their received form, in relation to what may have commonly been thought in the life of ancient Israel, will not be separable from understandings of sex and sexuality in relation to both the divine and the human in a contemporary context also. Such a discussion lies beyond my present scope, though it is surely clear that the determining issues will be at least as much conceptual—theological, philosophical, ideological, ethical—as textual.[21]

7. CONCLUSION

I have concentrated on the biblical material, as this is central to Stavrakopoulou's thesis and also my own interests, and have not touched on her handling of the extensive other ancient material which features prominently in her discussion. This leads me, in conclusion, to comment on what seems to me a striking disparity within her book. When she discusses the discovered remains of ancient southwest Asian culture, especially its figural depictions of deities and humans—accounts of which introduce some of her chapters—she interprets slowly and carefully. We are given meticulous and often-persuasive readings of objects that the non-specialist might pass over quickly; we are taken through all the details of a figure in ways that help us see and understand it better.

For example, the chapter on 'Divine Sex' opens with an account of 'an astonishing woman', a 'beautiful' Late Bronze Age clay figurine from the Shephelah (and a fine colour-plate photograph is provided). In terms of description: she 'meets the eyes of anyone who looks at her', her

[21] For a preliminary heuristic account of how to think of Yahweh in relation to Christian faith, with readings of the biblical text that are correlated with wider conceptual and existential issues, see R. W. L. Moberly, *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the Divine in Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

face is 'tenderly expressive', and 'her arms are long and slender, the colour of warm sand'. Moreover, 'she holds open her labia, revealing the dark, long opening of her vagina. Her gaze remains steady. She is the wife of God'. In terms of significance: 'She is a manifestation of the high goddess venerated across the southern Levant'. Indeed, 'she was a divine revealer of the secrets of new life, whose open labia manifested a powerful liminality: the inside-and-outside, entrance-and-exit place at which sexual potency, fecundity and birth were located' (p. 148).

Alongside this appreciative (if perhaps overdrawn) depiction, we encounter Stavrakopoulou's moral indignation at what appears to her to be a serious misrepresentation. In Jerusalem's Israel Museum, where this figurine is now located,[22] there is a notice next to her in the display case: 'This figurine may represent Asherah, the sacred prostitute'. To some this may appear innocuous (and suitably cautious with its 'may'). But Stavrakopoulou regards this 'as a shocking and misleading caricature, grounded in a centuries-old, biblically derived hostility towards the goddess once venerated as the traditional consort of Yahweh, the God of the Bible'. The common scholarly assumption that this goddess was a patron of sacred prostitution is a 'slur', 'for which there is no compelling evidence'. Only a conventional acceptance of the biblical depiction of Asherah gave rise 'to the distorted assumptions regurgitated alongside the goddess figurine in the Israel Museum today' (pp. 148–9).

Issues to do with Israelite religion in relation to the biblical text have already been touched on. For now I note the care, and indeed moral passion, which is given to her account of an ancient figurine, and her indignation that the Israel Museum says something which lacks 'compelling evidence'. It will be clear, however, from the preceding discussion that I do not find a comparable patient care, or insistence on the importance of compelling evidence, in her reading of the biblical text. Quite apart from her construal of Israel's deity, does she read, say, Ruth or Mary with the same care as this figurine?

This disparity of treatment in Stavrakopoulou's book raises an important and difficult question about the practice of ancient history and biblical interpretation. In order to develop this a little, I would like to note what seems to me a comparable disparity in the work of another distinguished ancient historian, who also writes accessibly for a wide audience, and who is also publicly upfront about his atheism: Robin Lane Fox. In his numerous books (of which I have read many, though admittedly not all) Lane Fox covers the whole span of the Graeco-Roman world from early to late antiquity. He is unusual both for the range of his learning, and for the fresh and independent nature of his interpretive judgements. Many years ago I read his *The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible*,[23] while this past winter, when I was in Waterstones with a book token from a speaking gig, his latest book, *Homer and his Iliad*,[24] caught my eye.

This recent discussion of the *Iliad* is full of fresh nuance and insight, such that one finishes it with a renewed appreciation of Homer's genius. For example, in a discussion of Homer's similes drawn from the natural world, Lane Fox says:

> Similes of sandcastles or a dreamer's nightmare attach us to a long continuity, one which stretches back at least 2700 years. Then too, we realize with awe, people behaved or felt just as we do, and Homer had noticed it exactly. He is not elusive here, as if he was an idea or a tradition or a blend of poets who composed over many centuries. He is an accessible individual, noticing and appreciating such things. His comparisons gain extra power for us as a result. For his first listeners they had no such retrospective force. (p. 356)

[22] See <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/198014-0>
[23] London: Viking, 1991. References to pagination are in parentheses in my main text.
[24] London: Allen Lane, 2023. References to pagination are in parentheses in my main text.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024

The sense of Lane Fox's existential empathy with his material is palpable. The reason for this is spelled out clearly in the 'Preface': 'Like its heroes, the Iliad had earned immortal glory … It is its own best advertisement … This book [i.e. Lane Fox's] … is based on long familiarity and love' (p. xi). Indeed: 'When I began, I feared that writing a book on the Iliad might temper my love of it. It has done the opposite, alerting me to ever more details, artistry and interconnections on each rereading' (p. xiii).

In the 'Preface' to *The Unauthorized Version*, he says: 'I write as an atheist … but there are times when atheists are loyal friends of the truth' (p. 7). The latter point is entirely fair; but it is not a good guide to the book's mode and tone of argument. Consider, for example, his discussion of the interpretive challenges posed by the role of Son and Spirit in the New Testament:

> Theology regained a wonderful complexity. Number One, the God of Abraham and David, had become Only One, the God of Ezra or the author of Daniel. Now, he had broken his solitude with the release of Numbers Two and Three. The truth of their relationships could breed subtle arguments for centuries, but the Fond Abuser had not lost his ancient habits. He had had a son, but he sent him to be reviled and crucified; within sixty years of this mission's conclusion, John the Christian saw on a Sunday that the ancient Father was about to exterminate a high proportion of the human race. (pp. 121–2)

Instead of attentive and alert delight we find elegantly amused dismissiveness. Biblical content is not probingly illuminated. The tone throughout is, in Schleiermacher's memorable formulation, that of a cultured despiser.

Stavrakopoulou and Lane Fox surely illustrate both the strengths and the weaknesses of scholarly study of a subject where one has a personal interest, an issue I touched on earlier. With material for which they feel an affinity, even a love—ancient southwest Asian artefacts and mythology, Homer's poetry—their work is disciplined, both careful and insightful. With material for which they feel no such affinity but rather an apparent aversion—the content of the Bible—their work is less disciplined, and all too often tells us more about the interpreter than about what is being interpreted. Of course, liking material is no guarantee of handling it well; nor dislike, of handling it poorly. But at least with these two scholars a basic correlation seems clear and the question about what, apart from extensive learning, enables and disables good scholarly work remains live.

For Stavrakopoulou's *God: An Anatomy*, however, the stakes are higher than for Lane Fox's *Unauthorized Version*. This is because of the ambition of her claim to have recovered what ancient Israel's deity Yahweh was really like, before this was covered up by the priests and scribes of the Persian period. The bolder the thesis, the more rigorous both its undergirding and its assessment must be. I have tried in this essay to provide some preliminary indications of the questions that such assessment might appropriately ask. I find it hard to resist thinking that her book sharply raises a perennial difficulty for the practice of ancient history in general, a difficulty which tends to be of particular concern in the study of the Bible in particular. How far is her reading a disciplined philological and imaginative exercise in hearing the ancient text ever more accurately? And how far is her reading an example of a scholar projecting her own preconceptions and values onto that ancient text, failing to see it for what it is, and thereby misreading it?

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/jts/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jts/flae063/7748716 by University of Durham user on 31 October 2024