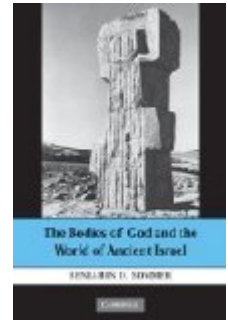**Benjamin D. Sommer.** *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xv + 334 pp. $85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-51872-7.

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Many scholars look askance at endorsements promoting a recently published book. The book under review certainly comes with its fair share of dust jacket praise. "Innovative," "audacious," "very original," "lucid," and "incisive" are just a few of the accolades directed its way. But any skepticism that one might harbor toward such acclaim in this case can safely be shelved. The book is a stunning foray into ancient Israelite religious traditions that produces new insights and raises critically important questions. While the book does not lack for claims that one might wish to contest, there is little doubt, in this reviewer's mind, that it will come to be seen as a ground-breaking work.

Benjamin D. Sommer's thesis is that, in order to grasp how divinity was understood in ancient Israel, one has to understand what he calls the "fluidity model" (rough definition: deities can have multiple personalities and be physically present in multiple locations at the same time). The fluidity model was widespread throughout the ancient Near East and strongly influenced cer-

tain Israelite traditions that have been preserved in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. These are the fluidity traditions. A secondary thesis of Sommer's is that two other significant biblical traditions rejected the notion of fluidity for understanding the nature of Yahweh, the Israelite and Judean god. Their rejection, however, was not--and, in fact, could not be--total. Within each of these traditions, one encounters a powerful ambiguity, an irresolvable tension. All of the traditions either resist or have difficulty imposing strict bounds on the space that their deity inhabits and in which he makes himself manifest.

The fluidity model entails two components: the fluidity of a deity's self and the multiplicity of a deity's embodiments. The first component reveals itself in three ways. *Fragmentation* appears in "several divinities with a single name who somehow are and are not the same deity" (p. 13). The parade examples are Ishtar (e.g., Ishtar of Arbela, Ishtar of Nineveh, Ishtar of Carchemish) and Baal (e.g., Baal of Ṣaphon, Baal of Aleppo, Baal of Shamem). *Overlap* occurs "between gods who are

usually discrete selves" (p. 16): Shamash becomes the face of Ninurta; Marduk takes on the name of Ea. Finally, one finds *merger* in such deities as Dagan-Ashur and Ningal-Ashur--separate deities that have combined into a single entity. Hence, divine selfhood, for these societies, was not fixed in any particular way, shape, or--and this leads to the second component of the model--bodily form. If a deity's "self" is fluid and subject to the kind of splitting that Sommer describes, then this "self" can be embodied in multiple objects at the same time and in different places. There were, for instance, deified statues of the same deity in different cities simultaneously. And the objects were no mere representations of the deity: each statue or stela really was the god or goddess.

Can one find the fluidity model in ancient Israel? Yes, but with qualifications. For example, biblical texts do not appear to refer to overlap or merger, given their authors' monotheistic outlook (more on Sommer's views concerning monotheism below). Evidence for fragmentation, however, comes from Kuntillet Ajrud (e.g., Yahweh of Samaria, Yahweh of Teman) and biblical references to "Yhwh at Hebron" (2 Sam 15:7) and "Yhwh at Zion" (Ps 99:2). Moreover, at least some Israelites, says Sommer, believed that Yahweh could be present in physical objects, such as wood (*'asherah*) and stone (*maṣṣebah*), and in multiple objects at the same time. Sources J and E and texts with a likely northern provenance seem especially influenced by the fluidity model.

But, alas, fluidity was not for everyone. Deuteronomic theology (or D--both Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history) rejects it. In deuteronomic texts, the *shem* (name) of Yahweh, merely a name or symbol in D, might dwell on earth in the temple, but Yahweh himself--that is, his one and only body--dwells in the heavens and nowhere else. Priestly theology (or P; this includes the Holiness Code) also rejects the fluidity model. In this tradition, too, Yahweh has only one body (the "image of God" in Gen 1:27). It is a body like

that of a human's--two eyes, a torso, two arms, two legs, etc.--and one that can be in only a single place at any given moment. But this body does not, as in D, sit idly by in the heavens: in P, Yahweh can fly. He arrives in Egypt to slaughter the Egyptians' firstborn sons, among other exploits, and then travels eastward to meet with Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. If P does not intend for the reader to imagine a flying Yahweh, then perhaps P believes that Yahweh moves invisibly from one place to another (à la an "aparating" Harry Potter). In either case, Yahweh comes down in P, according to Sommer, from the heavens, although, as I see it, P is decidedly unclear on Yahweh's actual point of departure. Once at Sinai, however, Yahweh stays put until the construction of the tabernacle is complete. Only then does Yahweh's *kabod* ("God's body … God's very self" in P [p. 68]) travel once again but, this time, exclusively in the tabernacle.

All of this raises the issue of sacred space. Certainly, both P and D believe in a kind of sacred center: for P, it is the tabernacle; for D, the city of Jerusalem. Sommer seeks to demonstrate, however, that both sources possess a sense of ambiguity around their beliefs about space. To illustrate, Sommer compares P's "tabernacle" with E's "tent of meeting." For P, on the one hand, the tabernacle resides in the center of the Israelite encampment and functions as "the site of an unceasing and ever-accessible theophany" (p. 81). In E, on the other hand, the tent lies outside the camp and is home only to occasional appearances by and communiqués from Yahweh. Sommer compares P and E with what Jonathan Smith calls the locative view and the utopian view, respectively. E is utopian, "in the basic sense of the word: lacking place" (p. 83). It emphasizes the periphery and omits any notion of a center. This means that P has to be locative (the divine has been fixed in place), right? Yes and no. Sommer claims that P is both (see pp. 83 and 121): locative when compared with E but utopian when read in comparison with deuteronomic theology (Yahweh is in the

heavens) or with what Sommer calls Zion-Sabaoth theology (Yahweh is in the Jerusalem temple). In contrast to these views, P's god is not attached to a permanent location. Yahweh may dwell in the tabernacle, but the tabernacle and, therefore, Yahweh are both mobile.

D's theology, like that of P, contains inherent tensions as well. While promoting the Jerusalem temple to the pinnacle of sacred space, it also deprives the temple of any real sacred presence. As noted, Yahweh never descends from heaven in D. The tension in D, then, is between a locative theology (there is and can be only one shrine) and a theology of transcendence (capturing the deity's presence is beyond the shrine's reach).

In his concluding chapter, Sommer waxes rather theological ("as a committed Jew" [p. 125]). He traces the persistence of the fluidity model into rabbinic and Kabbalistic traditions and even into Christianity (e.g., the trinity). He is bothered by those traditions that seek to maintain the absolute otherness of "God" by denying "God" a body. They do so, he claims, "at the cost of the personal God." It seems that, for Sommer, his god has to have a body so that the god can be one who "experience[s] joy and pain, loneliness and love." But, to transcend the limitations that having a body imposes, this god has "many bodies" and, thus, "remains woundable and alterable, but ... can nevertheless be omnipotent" (p. 142).

Sommer treats the topic of monotheism in a forty-six-page appendix and attempts to show that monotheism was well established early in ancient Israel's history. He defines monotheism in a very particular way, though. In Sommer's view, monotheism is not denying the possibility that other gods exist; instead, it affirms the complete supremacy of one particular deity to whom all other heavenly (and earthly) beings--whether called gods or angels--are subservient. Thus, Sommer's monotheism is not the kind of ontological monotheism that most people envisage but rather a hierarchical monotheism. He acknowledges that

there were likely polytheistic worshippers in ancient Israel, but his most controversial claim is that the literature of the Hebrew Bible (with essentially no exceptions) "exemplifies monotheism and not merely monolatry" (p. 172).

Two criticisms of Sommer on this last point are in order. First, he reads Deuteronomy 32:8-9 as if the god named Elyon ("Most High") there is Yahweh, without acknowledging that many other scholars see the text as making Yahweh out to be merely one of many subordinate deities under the rule of Elyon. Second, he contrasts the biblical view of Yahweh (Yahweh is the supreme deity) with Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Greek conceptions of divinity. Against this background, Yahwistic religion stands out as unique. But he does not say anything about Israel's neighbors Ammon, Moab, and Edom. When one considers these nations and their religions, another hypothesis emerges. It seems quite possible that, for each of these societies, its own god was the supreme deity: Milcom for the Ammonites, Kemosh for the Moabites, and Qaus for the Edomites. If this is correct (it is certainly open to debate), then what Sommer has recognized is not a religious view unique to ancient Israel but a phenomenon characteristic of the Iron Age nation-states of the southern Levant.

Several of Sommer's assertions from elsewhere in the book are also questionable: that multiple embodiment was not true of deities in classical Greece; that Yahweh's body/presence was believed by many to reside in the *'asherim*; that P is early (pre-exilic); and that scholars who date P late "have failed to respond to the arguments of the Kaufmannian school" (p. 240n65). On this last point, Sommer makes no mention in his notes or in his bibliography of prominent "late-P" scholars, such as Reinhard Achenbach, Reinhard Kratz, Christophe Nihan, Eckart Otto, Konrad Schmid, and Jeffrey Stackert, and does not mention Bernard M. Levinson's work on this issue. One other quibble is with his claim that "the P docu-

ment is in fact the most Christian section of Hebrew scripture" (p. 136). Sommer sees P as remarkably compatible with the Christian notion of incarnation, whereby a transcendent deity entered into the human realm. I will grant that, with its emphasis on divine transcendence, P could well be the most Protestant section, but it is not the most Catholic--at least in the view of this Protestant reviewer who happens to teach at a Catholic university and who by no means speaks for Catholics. The emphasis on divine immanence that marks the Catholic tradition can hardly be overstated. If this implies different understandings of the incarnation on the part of Protestants and Catholics, it would not be far off the mark.

No book is perfect, and others may well take issue with more of Sommer's arguments than the few points of disagreement that I have raised here. Nevertheless, it will be hard to read biblical texts in the same way after having encountered Sommer's analysis. His identification of the fluidity traditions--and even the term he has coined to describe them--will likely influence much future scholarship on Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible for years, if not decades, to come.

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