This is an ambitious book. In its preface, author Daniel O. McClellan identifies as a biblicist who has adopted methodologies from the cognitive sciences. Disrupting certain scholarly conventions in biblical studies is a stated goal. Of the defined terms, the most important (and perhaps least familiar) is the transitive verb *presence*: “to presence an agent is to reify their presence, or cause their presence to be manifested, according to someone’s perception” (x). McClellan eschews the term *religion*, viewing its social construct as an unduly distorting mental frame for the study of the Hebrew Bible.

The introduction states the book’s topic: the conceptualization of deity and divine agency, both in ancient Southwest Asia (McClellan prefers this term as a less Eurocentric way to refer to “the Near East”) and among contemporary scholars. By *divine agency*, McClellan seems to mean how the divine realm is made palpable and thus how deities are understood to operate. The book’s focus is on the Hebrew Bible yet also tracks later developments. Its generative question is: How is it that in ancient Southwest Asia, cultic images (e.g., statues) and certain divine representatives (e.g., angels) seem to be both identified *with* and distinguished *from* deities at the same time? In answering that question, McClellan eschews standard analytical dichotomies such as deity versus humanity, accepting certain scholars’ insistence that such approaches serve the interests of “the theological and academic structuring of power and values” (1).
The introduction quickly reveals that the book aims to correct one aspect of Benjamin Sommer’s well-known thesis about ancient deities. Unlike Sommer, McClellan holds that ancient Southwest Asians viewed the self as relational and as frequently partible and/or permeable. This implies that divine bodies were not perceived to be so distinct from human bodies after all. McClellan calls it “a difference of degrees, not of kind” (5). On the grounds that people often do things for reasons other than what they articulate, McClellan faults scholarship that relies on worshipers’ reflective explanations (rationalizations). This book instead offers a unifying theoretical framework that is claimed to be more informative and coherent.

Chapter 1, “What Is Deity?,” presents a model for the nature and origins of deity concepts, as drawn from the cognitive science of religion. To date, that discipline has hardly been applied to the study of the Hebrew Bible, according to McClellan. The following three points are argued: (1) deity concepts are extensions of an intuitive view of human persons, including deceased kin; (2) deities function to facilitate social cohesion in various ways: enabling clairvoyant knowledge that is useful for decision making (“access to strategic information”), monitoring social behavior, and providing opportunities for elites to signal their status and enhance their credibility; (3) figurines, stelae, and other “cultic media” manifest and transmit deity concepts, while presencing deities.

Chapter 2, “Encountering Divine Agency,” applies the foregoing framework to the material remains of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, as well as ancient Israel and Judah. McClellan finds that this survey validates the framework.

Chapter 3, “Deity in the Hebrew Bible,” and chapter 4, “YHWH in the Hebrew Bible,” cite basic tenets of cognitive linguistics—a deep well from which biblical scholars have been drawing water for decades. McClellan deploys those insights to bridge the gap between the material and phenomenological aspects of deity and divine agency and their representation in the biblical texts. Chapter 3 depicts the generic concept of deity; chapter 4 shows how YHWH exemplifies that generic concept, rather than departing from it as somehow unique. It shows that the more distinctive aspects of YHWH’s profile are elaborations on generic features and functions.

Chapter 5, “YHWH’s Divine Agents: The Ark of the Covenant and the Kābôd,” posits a developmental trajectory for two “presencing media” that are depicted favorably in the Bible, based on certain assumptions (outlined in the introduction) as to when biblical texts were composed. In both cases, McClellan concludes that the meaning of these entities evolved, until both were abandoned as no longer viable. The ark, which McClellan earlier called “the closest thing in the Hebrew Bible to an authorized Yahwistic cultic image” (19), is found to have paralleled, in form and function, the portable shrine models that nearby nations were making to house and mobilize their small divine images. As for YHWH’s kābô d (traditionally rendered as “glory”), the study finds

that in its earliest iterations it represented “the very body” of the deity, before being “compartmentalized” as a means to both presence the deity and also obscure its nature.

Chapter 6, “YHWH’s Divine Agents: The Messenger and the Šem,” examines the “messenger of YHWH” that, in certain narratives, famously seems to be distinguished from YHWH yet is also identified as YHWH. McClellan considers this depiction to closely parallel the identification by other ancient peoples of divine images simultaneously as the deity and not the deity. Biblical scholars have made many attempts to account for this ostensible conflation of identities, which this chapter helpfully groups into four types. After examining the evidence, McClellan comes down in favor of the view that the Hebrew word for messenger is a later interpolation in all of these narratives. The chapter then homes in on Exod 23:20–21, which McClellan construes as referring to the same divine messenger of YHWH featured in those other narratives. McClellan finds that, although this messenger is uniquely said to possess the divine šem, “name,” and a divine prerogative (namely, the ability not to pardon Israel’s offenses), the composer of that passage must have intended to encourage the audience to construe all other such passages in the same light. The remainder of the chapter reviews the use of the deity’s “name” elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to presence that deity, especially in Israel’s central sanctuary.

Chapter 7, “YHWH’s Divine Agents: Texts,” argues that over time YHWH’s presencing media were increasingly replaced by texts—starting with short inscriptions and amulets and moving to inscribed standing stones (stelae), as well as passages posted on doorways and worn as emblems on the forehead, and eventually including entire scrolls of the Torah. McClellan posits that this evolution began with the loss of more traditional means of the “sociomaterial presencing” of YHWH, upon the centralization of cultic worship in Judah, followed by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

The concluding chapter summarizes the most important findings: deity concepts simply elaborate on the conventional and intuitive conceptualization of human persons as partible and permeable; there is a divine/human continuum; and presencing media in the Bible arise from the notion of communicable divine agency—and therefore are incremental elaborations on widespread conventions regarding the representation and presencing of deity. McClellan also claims that the theoretical frameworks offered are applicable to the study of many other aspects of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the study of deity in general.

An appendix applies the findings of chapter 6 to the development of Christian thought, with respect to early perspectives on the relationship of Jesus to the God of Israel. Finally, the book features sixteen illustrations of ancient artifacts, drawings by McClellan that evince considerable artistic skill.
This review will now engage seven of the book’s features and claims. First, and most important, there is one cognitive concept that is conspicuously missing: conceptual metonymy, which is perhaps the most basic way that the human mind works. Conceptual metonymy licenses many linguistic conventions that people use to label and link related entities. To give a biblical example that works also in English, any oracle who speaks for YHWH is conventionally labeled, using metonymic shorthand, as “YHWH” (Gen 25:22–23; Judg 1:1–2; 20:18, 23, 27–28; 1 Sam 23:9–12; 2 Sam 21:1). For understanding this book’s topic, an appreciation for metonymy is indispensable, due to the Bible’s regular use of conventional metonyms to label intermediaries or underlings. (An utterance is always construed first and foremost according to convention.)

Typically, when scholars take the Hebrew language’s conventional idioms literally, as is the case here, they build theological castles in the air. A literal construal of those idioms also leads many scholars to conflate two cognitive frames that ancient speakers/writers arguably employed. These frames stand behind the depictions of deities and the related images and messengers—as well as humans, with their respective emblems and messengers. The ancients appear to have alternately used whichever frame was most salient, as follows. (1) Within the frame of presence, one party (e.g., a deity) is made evident (“presenced”) wherever its image (e.g., statue) is appropriately displayed. This is like the modern nation-state’s practice of flying an identical flag over all diplomatic outposts: the national government is thereby saying: “We are also here.” The flag is saluted and is considered subject to desecration, yet it is not the nation itself. (2) Within the frame of messaging, the principal dispatches a messenger in the principal’s name; the two parties are identical for the purpose of the errand. Likewise when a modern diplomat enters into negotiations, they speak for their boss (or an abstraction: their nation). Their very presence signals their principal’s absence. Yet via that intermediary, the principal is able to engage with others—as if present. Biblical scholars would do well to consider how a flag and an envoy differ from yet reinforce each other.

A second aspect of the book worthy of comment is that its provocative title, YHWH’s Divine Images, is not explained. Presumably the term divine images is being applied metaphorically to an array of other devices: the ark, kâbôd, šem, messenger of YHWH, and sacred texts. Its use with regard to

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2. This book’s sole mention of metonymy (136) treats it as a mere figure of speech.
4. On the ancients’ conventional labeling of messengers as the deity, see David E. S. Stein, “Angels by Another Name: How ‘Agency Metonymy’ Precludes God’s Embodiment” (forthcoming); it elaborates on a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, Boston, 20 November 2017. Prepublication version: purl.org/stein/angels. As for the ancients’ labeling of cultic objects as deities (e.g., Gen 35:4; Josh 24:23), it has yet been assessed in light of conventional metonymy.
YHWH (which appears only in the title) presupposes, rather than asserts, that those entities served the same “presencing” function as the idols worshiped in many surrounding cultures.

Third, the key term agent appears to be used fluidly in two senses: (1) an otherwise-unexplained effect’s cause, such as a deity; and (2) an instrument for achieving a result, such as an image that “presences” a deity. Hence a deity is an agent and also has an agent. Distinguishing which sense of agent is meant is an ongoing challenge for the reader.5

Fourth, the book uses they/their as the default pronouns for YHWH. This seems a questionable fit, since the individuation of YHWH is so central to the Bible’s message. That being said, the attempt to ascribe gender only where germane is estimable.

Fifth, the origin story for the concept of deity, reportedly borrowed from the cognitive science of religion, seems somewhat impoverished. Reducing deities to an explanation for the existence of windstorms or to their prosocial functions—manipulated by the elite—leaves little room for divinity as a means for the ancients to have expressed their experiences of life as intrinsically meaningful, wondrous, and interconnected. How, then, did transcendent spiritual experiences come to be associated with deities?

Sixth, Israeli biblical scholarship seems to have been largely overlooked.

Lastly, three technical quibbles: (1) In its nine instances the key term הַלֹּא is incorrectly transliterated (as it is often mispronounced); given the final guttural consonant, it should be ’ĕlōah, not ’ĕlōha. (2) Cited references, including some that are quoted, are often absent from the bibliography or the authors index. (3) The book’s review copy was defectively manufactured; its pages readily fall out of the binding.

All told, this book deserves respect for its ambitious attempt to integrate the Hebrew Bible into its Southwest Asian context, both theologically and historically. In addition, the impulse to refresh biblical studies by applying insights from the cognitive sciences is commendable. In both respects, McClellan was driven to integrate an extraordinarily wide range of scholarship. And this book’s conclusion that it offers “a crude draft of a map, not actual territory” (195) is laudably humble. Consequently, I look forward to the report that will surely follow McClellan’s next scholarly cartographic effort.

5. The usual sense of agent in the context of messaging—a party who is authorized to speak or act for another party—is not used in this book, even in the discussion of the “messenger of YHWH.”