

Report from a Scholar's Life: My Work on the Enigmas of the Notions of God

By Tryggve N.D. Mettinger

Farewell Lecture delivered at Lund University Friday December 5, 2003. Tryggve Mettinger was professor of Hebrew Bible at Lund University, Sweden, 1978—2003. At the request of some colleagues this English version was prepared in 2011 and contains some references to later work by Mettinger. For the publications of Mettinger referred to in the text below, see the present home page (tryggvemettinger.com).

Let us begin with an intellectual experiment. Let us look back at the last two millennia of Western culture and try to imagine these millennia without all the music that got its inspiration from the Bible. From the Gregorian chant, via Bach and Handel to Stravinsky, Britten, and Arvo Pärt. What silences! Let us for a moment mentally delete all pictorial art that represents biblical motifs. What huge gaps on the white walls of our museums. Let us imagine the non-existence of all the literature that derived its vital power from the Bible.—It is not necessary for me to use one single minute of this lecture to defend my conscious choice to devote my scholarly life to the study of the Book of the Books.

Probing the depths of the Hebrew Bible has been one of the fascinations of my life. I am deeply grateful to have been granted the privilege to work at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Lund. All of us working at this faculty have shared the joy of our united efforts to make this big department function optimally. There are several who stood shoulder to shoulder with me in our work to make Old Testament teaching and research at Lund prosper and develop. Let me mention especially Bo Johnson, Sten Hidal, Stig Norin, Fredrik Lindström, and Göran Eidevall. My thanks have special address to the senior seminar; in our almost weekly sessions we have been sitting together to analyse biblical texts and discuss chapters of forthcoming dissertations. It is comforting to note that the future responsibility lies with two competent colleagues, the Professors Sten Hidal and Fredrik Lindström, who have already done so much for the Old Testament work at Lund. My thanks also go to you, all our undergraduates, who made it a delight to be a teacher himself active in research. And I must not forget to mention the University Library and its staff, a *sine qua non* for front line research.

In this lecture I shall carry on an established tradition at the Faculty of Theology at Lund University, namely to start one's holiday as a retired professor with an overview of one's scholarly life so far. I shall move forwards in three steps. First, I shall deal with what has been the centre of my research

during my life as a professor, namely the notions of God. After that I shall describe briefly the main tenets of my private philosophy of science, focusing on the question: Can we do research on God? Finally, I shall sketch my first 37 years, before taking over the chair at Lund, as the son of a baker, undergraduate, PhD student and docent.

The Notions of God

The Divine Names of the Hebrew Bible

I use the term “notions of God” as a succinct summary of what the source material says about the personality of God, God’s activities, and the areas of activity of God, that is, answers to the following questions: who is God, what does God do, and in which dimensions of man’s experience is God active? In this lecture, “God” refers to the God of Israel, YHWH. My interest in the notions of God has its beginning in the 1960’s with my awakening interest in the divine name YHWH and the christological titles of the New Testament. The line backwards in time from the Early Christian designation of Jesus as *kyrios*, “Lord”, to the supreme divine name of the Hebrew Bible, YHWH, was a theme that the New Testament professor Evald Lövestam discussed with his students. Oscar Cullmann’s excellent work, *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments*, also provided a good deal of inspiration.

To me the basic question became: Which aspects of the *Gottesbild* (notions of God) appear when we study the different designations of God in the Hebrew Bible and investigate their linguistic aspects, their contexts (linguistic and extra-linguistic), and their connotations? It all began in the 1970’s, when I worked out my lecture for the Tokyo conference held in 1979: “YHWH SABAOTH: The Heavenly King on the Cherubim Throne” (publ. 1982). What I presented in this paper was the result of a perusal of all the attestations of the designation “YHWH Sabaoth”. This study became seminal to my later work in the area of the notions of God. My book *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (1988, Swedish original 1987; later in translations to Spanish, 1994, Corean, 2006, Portuguese, 2008 and Italian, 2009) deals with the same topic.

The various Old Testament theologies by Eichrodt, von Rad, Zimmerli, and others had very little to say about a motif that some of the divine designations put in high relief: the Lord as King. I found two different components being of central importance in the theology cultivated in the temple milieu in Jerusalem.

One of these is the regnant God: “the Lord Sabaoth enthroned on the cherubim”. This Sabaoth designation is connected with one specific cultic item: the empty cherubim throne in the temple (figs. 1 and 2). The temple is the meeting point, the interface, between heaven and earth. The Sabaoth

component in Israel's faith turns out to draw upon the metaphorical language used in ancient Canaan in connection with the high god El, known from the Ugaritic texts.



Fig. 1. Sovereign on his sphinx throne. Scene from an ivory plaque found at Megiddo.

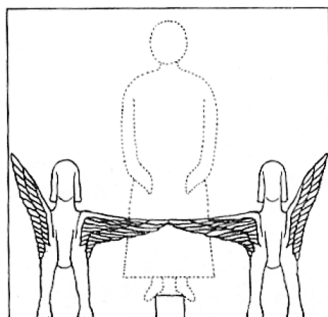


Fig. 2. This is a possible way to envisage the cherubim in Solomon's temple.

The other component is the battling God: the Lord denoted as *melek*, "king". We here find pieces of a mosaic of metaphors known from the Ugaritic Baal Cycle. From this it appears that Baal won his kingship in close combat with the powers of chaos. In Israel the chaos battle motif has developed into an omni-temporal concept spanning the time from the creation to the last judgment. The motif is thus applied to the creation (Ps 74:12-17 etc.), to the exodus (Ps 77:16-21 etc.), to the peoples' assault on Zion (Isa 17:12-14 etc.), and to God's ultimate, eschatological demonstration of power on the Day of the Lord (Isa 27:1 etc.).

My analysis of the notions of God in the 1980's stands in conscious contrast to the so far usual stress on exodus and covenant and draws on inspiration from scholars who stressed the mythologies of the biblical ambit as relevant material for the study of the biblical metaphors: Sigmund Mowinckel, Helmer Ringgren, Werner H. Schmidt, Frank Moore Cross and Johannes de Moor. In my book *In Search of God* I certainly overstressed a discontinuity between Canaan and Israel: the use of the designation of God as King was seen by me as the result of a process of confrontation with and confiscation from the Canaanites. Today I see more of continuity between the (ultimately) two symbolic universes.

The Exile: Shem and Kabod

During my work on the Sabaoth name I found a problem that led on to a new investigation: When I studied the distribution of the divine designation in the texts I found that the exilic era formed a white spot on the map. Why was this so? My answer was this: The Sabaoth name was closely connected to YHWH as the invisible deity enthroned on the cherubim, the cherubim forming an empty throne. What I suggested to term the Zion-Sabaoth theology held sway during the monarchic era. When the temple was laid in ruins by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. a cognitive dissonance emerged—to use a term I borrowed from the sociologist Leon Festinger—between the traditional Zion-Sabaoth theology speaking of God’s protective presence in the temple *and* the actual, historical experiences of the devastation of Zion and the temple. After the destruction of the first temple it became more or less impossible to use the Sabaoth designation.

Now, vacuums tend to be filled in one way or another. I found in the texts two replacements for the Sabaoth designation: “the Glory” (*kabod*) and “the Name” (*shem*). The Priestly theology documented by the Book of Ezekiel solved the problem of dissonance on the *temporal* level. The term *kabod* (“Glory”) was introduced, and the divine presence was relocated from the temple to the Mount of Olives for as long as the calamity lasted (Ezekiel 8–11; 43:1-9). God’s abandonment of the city made it open to destruction. The Deuteronomistic theology in the D-work solved the same dissonance on the *spatial* level: there, the divinity was relocated to heaven. In the temple, or what remained of it, there was only God’s *shem*, his Name (1 Kings 8:14-66). I published these results in my book *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (1982).

Studies like these only contribute to stress what is at bottom a truism: A people’s notions of God take shape in the process of struggle with the challenges of human existence. The notions of God reflect the situation in which they were formed. The scholar’s perspective must thus be the one found in the sociology of knowledge (see below).

The Sabaoth theology makes the problem of divine transcendence and immanence tangible in an interesting way. With their notion of the temple as sacred space—to use Mircea Eliade’s term—the ancient Israelites appeared to embrace both aspects of the divine. God is present on earth, but heaven and earth meet and intersect on a spot where the earthly dimensions are transcended: in the temple. The cherubim manifest at one and the same time an empty throne *and* God’s heavenly chariot (cf. 1 Chron 28:18). The enthroned God of the temple theology and the coming Lord of the theophanic tradition appear to be one and the same.

Aniconism

The notions of God continued to fascinate me. One problem that has engaged me during various periods of my life as a scholar is aniconism, cult without images. The impetus for this line of research was an invitation to give a lecture at the Donner symposium on religious symbols at Åbo (published in 1979). Not only Tacitus but also modern researchers have been inclined to see the veto on images as Israel's *differentia specifica*. In retrospect, it seems to me that one of the major attractions of this topic was the possibility to find something uniquely Israelite.

I found, with Dohmen, that the prohibition of images was a late phenomenon, to be dated broadly to the exilic era. However, the very absence of images seems to have been a fact already during earlier periods. There were thus reasons to distinguish between silent fact and proclaimed programme (Mettinger 1979: 22). Long before the express veto one has to reckon with the presence of the empty cherubim throne in the temple, manifesting the presence of the invisible deity. What I was at that time unable to discuss was the comparative issue: What about other Semitic peoples in Israel's *Umwelt*, did they have anything approaching aniconism? I knew only that image-centered cult was standard procedure in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The comparative problem became the major issue in my monograph from 1995: *No Graven Image: Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*. That piece of work crystallized around two random finds. One was the remark made by two ancient writers that the cult of Gades (near present-day Cadiz) was a cult without divine images (Silius Italicus and Philostratos). The other was a find in a second-hand bookshop in Leiden: a fresh copy of Joseph Patrich's excellent work *The Formation of Nabatean Art* (1990), which turned out to contain a competent discussion of Nabatean aniconism.

Peter Medawar, Nobel laureate biologist, once said that a scholar ought to tackle the most difficult problem that he or she dared hope to be able to solve. To me, aniconism lives up to high expectations in that respect. Karl Popper did in fact teach us how difficult it is to handle an investigation of the absence of something. Aniconism is precisely a kind of absence. To launch a project on aniconism was to me to make the leap of Kierkegaard. Nevertheless, the project gave me some of the most wonderful years of my scholarly life, well worth all efforts.

To begin with, I had to work out a theoretical and methodological basis. Taking my cue from C.S. Peirce, I first worked out definitions for my central terms: aniconism, iconophobia, and iconoclasm. I also took up a suggestion made by my New Testament colleague at Lund, Birger Gerhardsson, in his work on early Christian tradition and thus became able to use his distinction between *de facto tradition* and *programmatically tradition*. I took up this

distinction and applied it to my aniconism. It became clear to me that before the express, *programmatically* prohibition of images in the exilic era there was an older *de facto aniconism*, which displayed a double physiognomy. On one side of its Janus face we find the worship focused on an empty throne in the temple of Jerusalem. On the other we have cult with one or several standing stones, cultic stelae, as is the case with the cult at Arad, a daughter cult of the temple of Jerusalem.

My main strategy now became to focus not on the prohibition and absence of images that so far had taken central place in the debate, but on material pieces of aniconic nature, aniconic stelae. What struck me was, that Israel was by no means alone in having this type of aniconic cult.

The cult at Gades in Spain became a useful clue. It was actually a daughter cult founded by colonizers from Tyre. Thus, the traces led from Gades back to Tyre. In the Phoenician mainland there were both empty thrones (mainly small three-dimensional votif gifts) *and* stelae at cult places depicted on coins (fig. 3). This offered a striking analogue of the parallel presence of throne and stelae in Judah (throne at Jerusalem and stelae at Arad).

Thereupon I studied the Nabateans and was able to confirm Dahlman's and Patrich's conclusion that the Nabateans had aniconic cult, again with stelae. Nabatean personal names, the names of their gods, and one of their two types of temple architecture testify that the Nabateans came from the Arabian peninsula. It therefore did not come as a surprise to me that the pre-Islamic Arabs had aniconic cult focused on stelae at open-air cult places. This early Arabian *de facto* aniconism culminated in the proclamation of an express veto on images during the time of the Kalif Yazid II (721 C.E.), that is, several years before Leon II:s edict in 726.



Fig. 3. Coin from Tyre depicting a cult place with standing stones.

My research process continued with a study of the most ancient West Semitic material: cultic installations with stelae at Syrian Bronze Age settlements and corresponding phenomena in the Negev and in Palestine.

A grant from the Krook foundation at Lund University enabled me to study a number of cult places in the Negev *in situ*, and in this work I had the privilege of having the Israeli archaeologist Uzi Avner as my guide. Uzi Avner is one of the foremost international experts on this type of finds. It is important to

remember that (proto-)Israel's earliest cult was such open-air worship before one or several standing stones (*massebot*).

Step by step it became clear to me that aniconic worship of standing stones was documented among the Phoenicians, the Nabateans, the pre-Islamic Arabs, and still earlier at a number of West Semitic cult places in Syria, Negev, and Palestine during the Bronze Age.

My work on aniconism led to several highly interesting conclusions.

(1) The empty cherubim throne in the temple of Jerusalem belongs to a larger context mainly characterized by cult centered on standing stones.

(2) This *de facto* aniconism has a distribution that is strikingly similar to that of the West Semitic languages. Mesopotamia, on the other hand, had cult of a different type: cult in temples with a cultic image, where the god had his court and where cultic functionaries were busy caring and feeding the deity.

(3) The temporal sequence from *de facto* aniconism to prohibition of images is evident in two different West Semitic cultures: the Arabian and the Israelite one. The two prohibitions, the Israelite one and that of Islam, are cousins with striking family resemblances.

(4) My dream of being able to study what is genuinely Israelite evaporated. *De facto* aniconism was a common West Semitic phenomenon. However, one is justified to say that the express veto on images, formulated centuries before that of Islam, belongs to Israel's *differentia specifica*.

In 1995 I published *No Graven Image: Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context*. It provoked an intensive scholarly debate. Symposia were arranged. A group of scholars argued that pre-exilic Israel had iconic cult, cult of images, of usual ancient Near Eastern type (Oswald Loretz, Herbert Niehr, Christoph Uhlinger, Annika Berlejung). Alleged signs of this were found in linguistic formulations about cult "before the face of YHWH", which was assumed to indicate the presence of a cultic statue, the table with the "breads of presence", etc. Attestations of anthropomorphic cultic statuary were assembled—though here, the scholars were unable to adduce one single example of an image of YHWH. To me the Jerusalemite temple cult is at one and the same time anthropomorphic and aniconic. There is a throne in the temple, a cherubim throne, but this is empty. I must confess that I find myself having good reasons for my own overall view. Certain scholars, however, displayed surprising inability to see the difference between *de facto* aniconism and programmatic veto on images.

Early West Semitic cult was cult focused on standing stones. A transition to iconic worship is a later phenomenon when it is found (Samaria, etc.). We must also be aware of the difference between this West Semitic open-air cult and the type found in Mesopotamia with divine images in temples. What we find in Jerusalem is a combination of temple and aniconic representation of the deity, no more strange than what we find at Arad or at the Byblos temple depicted on the coin of Macrinus (temple plus stele). In my conclusion that the temple of

Jerusalem did not contain an iconic image of Yhwh I am one of a hardy band listing such scholars as Othmar Keel, Ted Lewis, Ronald Hendel, Johannes de Moor, and Nadav Na'aman. [For a discussion with my critics on these matters, see Mettinger 2006a and 2006b.]

The Dying God

For many years I have tried to set apart Saturday mornings for the study of extra-biblical texts from the ancient Near East: Akkadian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, etc. This habit of mine yielded a rich reward when once more, by what seemed to be sheer coincidence, I came to devote my research to another religio-historical theme of a certain importance. In what may have been my unconscious quest for the distinctive features of Israelite faith, I became interested in the notion of the Living God, attested by formulations about a God “who does not die” (Hab 1:12) or the triumphant fanfare “the Lord lives” (Ps 18:47). The latter sounds like a proclamation made in conscious protest against the gods who die and return.

In the early 1980's I happened to read a fine Old Testament dissertation after I had just finished a new perusal of the Ugaritic Baal Cycle. The author devoted a handful of pages to dismantling the idea that Baal was a so called dying and rising deity. Having the Ugaritic text in fresh memory I felt that someone must be wrong here: either myself or the author of the dissertation. For a full decade I carried the problem at the subliminal level of my consciousness, making just casual observations in my general reading of primary and secondary material. I kept asking myself: Dying gods, did they return to life or not?

It was not until the second half of the 90's that I was able to devote my unbridled attention to the problem and finally presented the results in my monograph *The Riddle of Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East* (2001). It was indeed a privilege to devote several years of one's life as a scholar to what M.H. Abrams, a renowned scholar of comparative literature, called “the archetype of archetypes”, known from a number of the most well-known pieces of world literature, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and many others.

My survey of the research history of the motif egged me on to carry out my own investigation. After Frazer (*The Golden Bough* 4:1; 3rd ed, 1914) and Baudissin (*Adonis und Esmun*, 1911) had presented the thesis about dying and rising deities, there followed almost a full century of scholarly contributions that tried to falsify their conclusions. The summarizing dictionary article by J.Z. Smith in Eliade's *Encyclopedia* (1987) is a clear example in case, and as a *fermata* in *fortissimo* stands the sixty-page contribution by Mark S. Smith, the renowned Ugaritologist, in which he seemingly tries to drive the last nail into the coffin of the dying god (1998).

By then I had already devoted a couple of years to my own wrestling with the primary material. Some weeks at the library of Pontificio Istituto Biblico at Piazza della Pilotta in Rome in 1996 gave me a flying start. In the secondary literature I sometimes found what looked like evasive strategies. In the case of Baal of Ugarit, it had been suggested that he never himself descended to the Nether world to the god of death, Mot. Instead, a twin of his was taken to act as his “stand in”, cheating Mot. Another suggestion was that Baal was a god of the Anatolian Telepinu type, who disappeared but did not die. I demonstrated, at least to my own satisfaction, that neither of these two suggestions is tenable. Baal was indeed a dying and rising deity. The basic contrast of the myth is that of life vs. death.

I then continued with other, later gods in the Phoenician world and discussed *pro et contra* for Adonis, Melqart, and Eshmun. The resurrection motif turned out to be clearly attested for Melqart. One of the cultic functionaries of this god is thus denoted as *mqm 'lm*, “resuscitator of the god”; compare also the iconography of the vase from Sidon. Resurrection seems probable for Adonis as well, and is at least possible in the case of Eshmun.

I then went on analysing material for two deities that I advanced as comparative sidelights, namely Osiris (fig. 4) and Tammuz. Working on Tammuz was particularly exciting. A recently published text from Mari fell nicely into place in my puzzle. The late material for Adonis at Byblos in Lucian’s *De Dea Syria* was supplemented by an Amarna letter from Late Bronze Age Byblos that seemed to speak of a god of the Tammuz type (Damu) precisely at this site (EA no. 84).

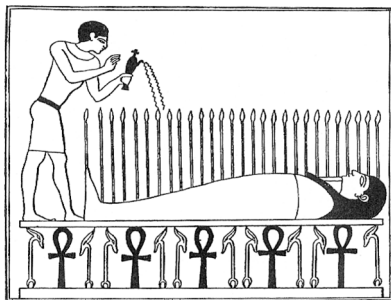


Fig. 4. Osiris mummy with sprouting corn.

In a lecture at the 48th Rencontre Assyriologique at Leiden in 2002 (Mettinger 2005a) I then worked out the peregrinations of the death-and-return mytheme: It is first attested in Mesopotamia in the mythology of Inanna/Ishtar. Bronze Age Ugarit borrows it from there, and still later we find it in Phoenician mythology of the Iron Age. Israel’s YHWH was not a dying and rising god but differs from such West Semitic deities. At the same time it is necessary to note that there were a number of storm gods who were not dying and rising deities.

Overall, my work on the dying and rising deities led me to question a consensus that viewed matters in a very different way and denied the presence

of such deities in the biblical ambit. The problems connected with “the archetype of archetypes” are also of some interest to the research on early Christianity. Are we to read the texts about the resurrection of Jesus in the light of the pre-Christian presence of dying and rising gods in the Near East? I sketched the problem in the epilogue to my book and adduced some observations that, as I later recalled, had been made already by Nötscher (see Mettinger 2005a: 208 note 41): Jesus cannot without further ado be brought in line with the ancient Near Eastern deities that die and rise.

On a more personal level I was attracted to the existential dimensions of the material that I investigated. The Ugaritic text about Mot’s (Death’s) invitation to Baal expresses the awe that all humans are able to feel towards the death and constant renewal in the nature that surrounds us. The text about Ishtar’s descent to the Netherworld is a text of striking beauty about the inexorable undressing which is the final lot of every human being.

The study of the notions of God was my major interest during my tenure of the chair at Lund, that is from 1978. My earlier years shall be dealt with in a while. But first some remarks about my general stance as far as philosophical matters are concerned.

Can We Carry out Research on God? Issues of Philosophy of Science

I embarked on biblical research as a convinced Christian, and I have so remained. During my early years as a student of the Bible, I envisaged a kind of “archaeology of revelation”, what the Germans called *Offenbarungsarchäologie*, that is, moving backwards in time hoping to ascertain the oldest and supposedly most genuine kernel of biblical faith, the essential nucleus. I guess that Karl Barth would have liked my endeavours.

Ever since high school my epistemological sympathies lay with Immanuel Kant. What has been called “Kant’s problem” —or one of his major problems at least—is the problem of *demarcation*: where is the borderline for one’s scholarly endeavours? As human beings with a body we have a mental and sensory apparatus. Of what may be the *total* reality we can only know anything about that part which can be mediated through our human senses. The very apparatus that we own by birth or construct later (technical devices) gives the borderline for the possible experience.

As is well known, Kant draws a sharp line of demarcation between the world of empirically accessible phenomena on one side and a transcendent reality on the other. He eliminates the traditional arguments for the existence of God one by one, an operation that rendered him the epithet *der Alleszermalmer*, “the man who grinds everything down”. Nevertheless, it is important to note that his philosophy does not end up in an atheist stance but in a careful

demarcation of the area of pure reason. The conviction that God exists is not a logical but a moral certainty of subjective nature. What Kant proposed was not that God does not exist but rather this: We cannot know that God exists, nor can we know that he does not.

If Kant had been among us today, I would have appreciated his comments on the so-called constants of nature, some fifteen critical and extremely fine-tuned values decisive for the world of physical reality. Among these is Planck's constant h , which the balance between attraction and repulsion between electrons and atomic nuclei. My late brother in law, a nuclear physicist, has told me that if Planck's constant had been stronger or weaker by just one in a thousand, life on earth would have been impossible. We should note that similarly narrow margins hold for the other constants of nature. The idea that all of these spontaneously assumed their optimal values to form a fantastic configuration puts my credulity on a very hard test. Is an X-factor outside the system responsible for fine-tuning the critical values? [For my later discussion of the constants of nature, see Mettinger, I Begynnelsen (2011). chap. 1, available as a PDF-file under Research on this website].

Whatever Kant would have said on this, I am sure that he cannot simply be ignored in the history of philosophy. Scholarly work on theological issues in the period after Kant must in principle study religion from an agnostic position. My faith does indeed deal with “what no eye has seen and no ear has heard”—but all of this lies beyond the area of my activities as a scholar. My research deals with human faith, manifest in texts, rites, and iconography. And here we do have empirical data.

In my philosophical pantheon I reserve a place of honour at the side of Kant for Karl Popper. Inspired by Popper, I would like to stress that the work of the biblical scholar on texts etc. results in scientific conclusions that have two special characteristics. (1) They are falsifiable—otherwise they are not scientific. (2) They are provisional. Our common scholarly enterprise is carried on through “conjectures and refutations”. Research is an endless series of provisional efforts; old and obsolete scholarly ideas are replaced by new ones.

Against the background of all this I must—as at one and the same time a Christian *and* a biblical scholar—draw a line of *demarcation* between *what I believe I know as a scholar* and *what I know I believe as a Christian*.

There are certain indications to the effect that the ancient Orientals were sometimes aware of the metaphorical nature of their “god talk” (KTU/CAT 1.4.VII:15-39; Isa 40:18, 25; 46:5, 9). We do not know how widespread such awareness may have been. To a believer in the 21st century, imagery is not just aesthetic embellishments of other referential talk. No, metaphorical language is the only possible way of talking about God. At bottom we are faced with two alternatives: to talk about God in images *or* not to talk about God at all. Gustaf Aulén gave a striking formulation of this insight when he said that “the language of images is the mother-tongue of faith”. I would say that what the

Bible gives us is a transposition of the heavenly music played at superhuman Hertz frequencies to the frequencies mastered by our human sensory organs.

In the 80's we had in our senior seminar at Lund a number of sessions on metaphorical language, in which we joined efforts with people from the department of comparative literature. We tried to assess some major developments in this field. Such inter-disciplinary contacts have been highly inspiring and have enriched several dissertation projects in Hebrew Bible at Lund. It should also be mentioned that the Faculty of Theology at Lund has a competent representative of linguistic and literary approaches in my fine New Testament colleague Birger Olsson. [Inspiration from modern literary theory is visible in my articles on intertextuality (Mettinger 1993), rhetoric (Mettinger 2008c), the monographs with the titles *The Eden Narrative* (Mettinger 2007) and *I Begynnelsen* (Mettinger 2011)].

I have already indicated that my study of the notions of God can be understood as an attempt to discuss biblical issues in the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. The term "sociology of knowledge" is not quite felicitous, but it is difficult to find an alternative. As a biblical scholar, I have studied religion in a perspective ultimately inspired by Durkheim, Mannheim, and Berger & Luckmann. The sociology of knowledge has its focus on human thinking in its social context. Every religion makes up a symbolic universe. Such a symbolic universe can be studied not only in its function on the level of texts with their intra- and intertextual play but also in its phase of production, as a product generated by the culture that brought it forth. "Symbolic universes are social products with a history." Human metaphorical language used about God reflects the culture in which it was generated. The Canaanite pantheon known from the Late Bronze Age City of Ugarit reflects bureaucratic structures known from the society of Ugarit. The metaphorical language of the Hebrew Bible reflects the culture and society of the ancient Hebrews. Here we cannot ignore the cultural contacts with other peoples in the biblical ambit as an inspiring factor. In retrospect, I would say that my development as a student of the Bible may be described as a journey from "the archaeology of revelation" to "the sociology of knowledge".

Against this background it becomes a matter of course to engage in a study of extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern material in order to better understand the culture of ancient Israel in its continuity and discontinuity *vis-à-vis* its *Umwelt*. Continuity is not the least important aspect in this context. Practically all the individual features of Israelite God language are known from other parts of the Middle East, especially from the West Semitic context. What is new is the configuration made up by the separate elements, as Patrick D. Miller has pointed out. In the image of YHWH ancient Israel integrated features otherwise distributed between different deities, for instance Baal and Mot. In this work on the Hebrew God-language, I have reached the insight that the earliest picture of YHWH was from the beginning drawn with the help of metaphors recognized

from formulations about earlier West Semitic storm gods, a conclusion I share with what still seems to be a minority of scholars. In the study of “the Bible and the ancient Near East” I received inspiration from the works of scholars such as Sigmund Mowinckel, Helmer Ringgren, Klaus Koch, Werner H. Schmidt, Frank Moore Cross, J.J.M. Roberts, Johannes de Moor, Othmar Keel, Eduard Lipinski, and Mark S. Smith.—A fine hall of fame!

In the field of humanities, we have for decades experienced a broad trend of postmodernism, the death of the author, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, and scepticism *vis-à-vis* the heretic belief that an author may have had one or several intentions. For my own part I have felt slightly unresponsive towards much of this. Texts can have many different meanings—but they cannot mean just anything. The interpretations may be several—but all are not equally good. Personally, I am more in line with scholars such as E.D. Hirsch, George Steiner, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer. In his outstanding work *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (1998), the last-mentioned scholar underlined that texts may be acts of communication. Taking his cue from speech-act theory and the philosophy of law, he delivered a scathing critique of post-modern theorizing that has spread like a pandemic disease in late 20th century humanities.

My First 37 Years

When my father died in 1993, I became aware of how much he has meant to my personal notions of God. With his life and example he gave the divine metaphor “father” its contents. My father and mother gave me my faith as a precious gift. My grand-mother, Bengta Hallberg, lived as a widow in my parents’ home, a pious Christian woman belonging to Sunnerbo Härads Missionsförening, a pietistic group in the Church of Sweden with strong convictions and minimalist life-style. Time and again she asked me to read aloud to her from the Bible, often from the Old Testament, and this was certainly her way to rouse my interest in the Word of God.

The economy of the family was stable, but we were far from rich. The survival of our small family bakery presupposed the conjoined efforts of all the family members, three boys and one girl in addition to the parents. In our bakery, I early learnt that the pleasure someone may take in his or her work is a reality. However, I have never been able to forget the insight that advanced studies and research are too much of fun to be regarded as proper work. I have devoted my academic life to a hobby of mine.

All the members of the family, with the exception of my grandmother, were Pentecostals. After a professional life as a biblical scholar, I look back with profound gratitude on my teenage years in the Pentecostal church at Helsingborg. The Bible hours on Saturday evenings were enjoyable occasions. Hilding Ekman, the pastor, served us exegetical expositions of the letters to the

Corinthians and other texts. Now and then, his good colleague from Lund, Carlo Johansson, a man perhaps even more versed in the Bible, visited us and led our way through Greek key terms in Romans 8, just to mention one example. In his novel *Lewis Resa (Lewi's Journey)*, the Swedish writer P.O. Enquist gives an accurate picture of the inner life of the Pentecostal milieu.

I have long since found my spiritual home in the Church of Sweden. But still I remain deeply grateful to the milieu that showed me the ways of the Kingdom of God. I share the conviction of God's reality and power in our lives and in the world of today. But it should be noted: I have never been a fundamentalist and feel that I do not manage to answer up to the expectations in this respect of some dear friends of mine in the spiritual context that I left. But let it be said today: I feel deeper spiritual fellowship with a pious Pentecostal than with a member of the Church of Sweden episcopate who happens to have nondescript theological notions. And I am grateful to the Pentecostal movement for the most precious gift of my life: my "favourite wife" since June 14, 1963, Solvi.

Much could be said about my formative high school years in Helsingborg. The teacher of Swedish and literature, Elmer Sjöström, aroused in me a life-long interest in his field, and literature became one of the subjects I studied at the university. The lector of Greek, the Plutarch scholar Carl Stoltz, made me consider classical languages as a possible field for academic studies.

The most remarkable member of the teachers' team was Ernst Percy, a New Testament scholar with an international reputation who never made it all the way to a chair. As untenured scholar who had got the maximum number of years as a docent and then as a "research docent" he was, at the age of 55, deported from the university, having to spend the rest of his active years at a high school with some 1.400 teenage boys. As a teacher of religion and philosophy he treated us to academic lectures in which every single word of his about Gnosticism or Immanuel Kant's epistemology was weighed on his golden scales. In his morning prayers before the whole school began its day of work, the exiled Lund academic entertained his audience of young rascals with the most recent emendations of New Testament scholarship. However, in all his unworldliness Ernst Percy inspired in me a vague intuition that research, biblical research, marked by uncompromising intellectual honesty and conscious epistemological premises could be something worth investing one's life in.

The fact that I took special interest in biblical studies, I ascribe to the synergistic operations of divine providence and the role models offered by two fine biblical scholars among my university teachers when I was an undergraduate: Bertil Albrektson (OT) and Evald Lövestam (NT). I had to admit, though a bit unwillingly, that our Church Historian, Lars Österlin, managed to awake my interest in that major part of the history of the Church that I had so far looked upon as a heretical parenthesis between early

Christianity and the Swedish Pentecostal movement. Not until I wrote my master's thesis in OT did I meet my future *Doktorvater* Gillis Gerleman, a man whom all of us in the OT undergraduate seminar looked upon with awe, inspired by his demand for proper concordance work and careful philological ground work.

I Began as a Historian

I am nowadays a biblical scholar working along philological and religio-historical lines. However, I began as a student with a strong interest in the history of Palestine and Israel. My doctoral dissertation about titles and functions of the high state officials in Jerusalem used as its point of departure three lists of officials in the books of Samuel and Kings. It appeared under the title *Solomonic State Officials: A Study of the Civil Government Officials of the Israelite Monarchy* (1971). My interest in the topic had been awakened by Anson F. Rainey in Jerusalem during my semester at the Swedish Theological Institute in 1965. When Gillis Gerleman unknowingly suggested this as my dissertation topic I took this as a new sign of divine providence and readily accepted. The project contained demanding semantic analyses of difficult Hebrew titles, work on the fiscal districts and on diverse topographical problems, and comparison with administrative structures known from elsewhere in the Fertile Crescent, above all Egypt. Hebrew philology and the ancient Near East—that was a combination apt to whet my appetite. The project became an interesting exercise in the art of walking on thin ice and working with various methodological approaches.

One observation that I made was that the young state lacked a minister of justice. It is always important to note the gaps in a system. In this case the obvious implication was that the final responsibility for the administration of justice remained with the king himself. I became interested in the royal dealings with matters of justice. The study of this aspect of the administration of justice led me to study the ideology of kingship, and this soon became my focus of research. The results were published in my book *King and Messiah: The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings* (1976).

The work of the Uppsala school certainly gave me inspiration. But in difference from this I devoted thorough attention to kingship as an institution. I focused on the prose material and subjected these texts to a source-critical analysis in order to avoid a synchronistic picture of things. The work revolved around the legitimization of royal power. I found the king forming the centre of a network in which he had vital ties with both the people and with God. Solomon ascended to the throne without the “civil” legitimization or authorization granted by the popular assembly, constituted by the anointing by the elders and by the acclamation by the people. Instead, the signs of his

“divine” legitimization, constituted by divine promises, were presented with due emphasis in texts such as the dream at Gibeon (1 Kings 3) and the Prophecy of Nathan (2 Samuel 7). Israel turned out to be a surprisingly early example of contractual legitimization of power (the compact between the kings and the popular assembly). Over time, there was added stress on the sacral authorization of the king, and this eventually led to a kind of “high Messianism”, to borrow a term from New Testament studies. [I later returned to 2 Samuel 7 and carried out a rhetorical analysis in “Cui Bono? The Prophecy of Nathan (2 Sam 7) as a Piece of Political Rhetoric” (Mettinger 2008c).]

If I had written *King and Messiah* today, it would probably have looked different in a number of ways. Among other things, I would have asked myself if Timo Veijola was not right in taking more material as Deuteronomistic than I then did myself. At the same time, I would still find it difficult to ascribe such a late date to the promise to David of a dynasty in 2 Samuel 7. Isaiah 7 would hang in open air on the assumption of a late date to the dynastic promise. A discussion that I would also have entered on would be the tenets of the “Copenhagen school”, which questions the very existence of both state and temple in Judah in the days of Solomon.

The last piece I wrote before the issues connected with the notions of God completely captured my interest was a brief monograph in which I ruthlessly eliminated the so-called Servant Songs, that is, Bernhard Duhm’s idea (1892) that Second Isaiah contained a number of special Servant Songs, placed in this prophetic book *post festum*. In modern studies of these passages, the Servant was taken to be not Israel as elsewhere in Isaiah 40–55 but an individual, the identity of which turned out to be highly controversial in subsequent scholarly writings. All of this had been text-book knowledge, inoculated into the veins of students for some eight decades. I produced this monograph during some hectic weeks before the applications for the OT chair at Lund were to be handed in (1977). It later appeared in almost the same shape under the title *A Farewell to the Servant Songs* (1983).

The background of this little project is as follows. I had been asked to give some lectures at the Örebro Missionsskola (Örebro Theological Seminary) and, using the Servant Songs as my example, try to demonstrate the methods used by biblical scholars. In my preparations, I got stuck with an elementary problem: how to delimit the passages denoted as Servant Songs. My scepticism led me to investigate the very basis of Duhm’s theory, and what I found struck me with surprise. Duhm had indeed suggested that these passages had been inserted later, at places where the original manuscript had sufficient open space in the margins or between major pieces of the text! Duhm’s theory had served as the foundation for a mighty cathedral-building enterprise stretching over decades and producing countless monographs and essays. Three weeks of intense and hilarious work with my scholarly battering-rams were enough to shatter the concrete of this impressive building. A basic scholarly instinct of

mine was that of the need for intellectual economy in the spirit of Occam. The Servant Songs hypothesis was, and is, to me an unnecessary addition to the exegetical enterprise.

My little study aroused violent indignation documented in spirited letters and reviews. One colleague wrote to me that he had been unwise enough to bring my *Farewell* book to a bathing holiday at the Mediterranean and found his pleasure seriously disturbed by a pitiless Scandinavian. H.-J. Hermisson—at the time busy with a commentary on Isaiah 40–55 in the Duhm tradition and appearing in fascicles—published a long review under the title “Ein voreiliger Abschied” (“a premature farewell). He could thus undisturbedly carry on his chosen course in the subsequent fascicles.

The Servant Songs theory had long been considered as one of the gilt-edged securities of the exegetical stock exchange. I came to realize the truth of Max Planck’s dictum: “The truth never prevails. It is its enemies that eventually die.”

It is time to finish. Why do we engage in research? The Swedish biologist Hans G. Boman lists three different types of motivation for a scholar: the moral one (to alleviate suffering), the amoral one (sheer curiosity and creative zest), and, finally, pure ambition. Ambition? Yes, I confess. Curiosity and creative zest? Yes, indeed, they have probably been still more important in my case. Moral motivation? Hardly. Hobby activities during well paid working-hours have been a suspect but irresistible temptation.—But I promise to improve at last.

Instead of footnotes

My bibliography is found in the present homepage (tryggvemettinger.com) under Publications. It is also found in the second of the two *Festschriften* that I have had the pleasure to receive, namely Göran Eidevall and Blazenka Scheuer, eds., *Enigmas and Images: Studies in Honor of Tryggve N.D. Mettinger* (ConBOT 58, 2011). The first *Festschrift* was Stig Norin, ed., *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 65, 2000.

On the Deuteronomistic Name Theology, see S.L. Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology* (BZAW 318, 2002), which I reviewed in *JBL* 122, 2003, 753-755.

The discussion on aniconism is reflected in K. van der Toorn, ed., *The Image and the Book* (1997), where my contribution is found on pp. 173-204. Note also my contribution “A Conversation with My Critics: Cultic Image or Aniconism in the First Temple?” (Mettinger 2006b, also in German in *ZAW*, Mettinger 2006a).

As for Immanuel Kant, I am indebted to my Lund colleague in the philosophy of law for a perusal of the section above on issues of philosophy of science. He called my attention to some important passages in Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A. 829-830 = B. 857-858, see now Kant, *Werke*, Darmstadt (WBG) II. 1998, pp. 693-694, and *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* A. 223-226, see now *Werke* IV, 1998, pp. 254-256.

To the issue whether there was a consciousness of the distinction between imagery and referential language, see Mettinger, *In Search of God*, 1988, p. 206, and M. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine*, 1990, pp. 82-87.

Ernst Percy is vividly portrayed by T. Kronholm in S. Strömholm, ed., *De lärdes bibliotek*, 1993, pp. 203-215, pp. 208f. My obituary on my predecessor Gillis Gerleman is found in *Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet i Lund. Årsberättelse 1993-1994*, pp. 36-42.

On the Servant Songs problem, see now F. Matheus, *Singt dem Herrn ein neues Lied: Die Hymnen Deuterojesajas*, 1990.

I would like to thank Ola Wikander for his perusal of my English draft which has profited from a number of his suggestions for the English style.

Illustrations

Fig. 1, see Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 1987, pp. 128 and 220.

Fig. 2, *ibid.*, pp 129 and 220.

Fig. 3, see Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 1995, pp. 96 and 233.

Fig. 4, see Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection*, 2001, pp. 171 and 259.

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