

(2023 March 27) A Body That's Divine - Review of Stavrakopoulou, God - an Anatomy (NYRB)

Anna Della Subin

A recent book catalogs the Old Testament's physical descriptions of God, who ate, probably drank, got mistaken for an ordinary man, and was likely circumcised.

April 6, 2023 issue

Reviewed:

God: An Anatomy

by Francesca Stavrakopoulou

Knopf, 592 pp., \$35.00

Ezekiel and the hand of God; fresco from the synagogue in Dura Europos, Syria

Picture Art Collection/Alamy

Ezekiel and the hand of God; fresco from the synagogue in Dura Europos, near Salhiyah, Syria, third century CE

If human eyes could look at God's body, what would we see? In *God: An Anatomy*, Francesca Stavrakopoulou catalogs the anthropomorphic references to God in the Bible, from his feet to his scalp, in order to gain a clearer picture of what the deity enshrined in its pages looks like. A professor of the Hebrew Bible and ancient religion at the University of Exeter, Stavrakopoulou draws on the testimony of those who saw God or were in his physical presence, including Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. She searches the Bible not only for body parts but also for God's very human behaviors, emotions, and appetites. (God is, in her reading, unquestionably male.) She returns often to the original languages of the scriptures and corroborates her findings with archaeological evidence and older mythology underlying the figure of Yahweh.

Stavrakopoulou's study also recounts the disappearance of this body, almost like a missing-person report: while the ancient scribes of the biblical texts imagined God as embodied, over the course of centuries of Jewish and Christian doctrinal formation, rabbinic commentary, ecumenical debates, and influence from Greek philosophy, his body "gradually vanished," becoming increasingly incorporeal, occulted, and abstract. (Although her references rove across time, from the medieval Maimonides to Jeff Koons, she does not consider the impact of Islam on conceptions of God's nature.) This vanishing culminates in God's alleged death with the complicity of modern atheism and science. The book ends with the image of a divine hulk stretched out on a cold marble slab; traces of human blood remain beneath his toenails, from stamping on populations as if they were grapes.

Her project resembles an earlier book called *God*, Jack Miles's 1996 Pulitzer Prize-winning work that used literary criticism to depict God as the protagonist of a great epic. Stavrakopoulou's forensic approach loses the poetic beauty of the scriptures, which Miles so

brilliantly brought to the fore. She rejects metaphor, allegory, and any other veil of mystery through which humankind has usually encountered and described the divine. But her method has its own delights. Much like a fundamentalist who insists stories such as Noah's ark are historical fact, Stavrakopoulou takes literalism as far as she can: here we meet a God who eats several of the ark animals when they are grilled after the flood. On the autopsy table, God's belly is "swollen with spiced meat, bread, beer and wine."

Her emphasis on the disappearance of the corporeal God sits uneasily with the fact that God's body has never really gone away. Even if we consider God to be nonexistent or unknowable, or if we abide by religious prohibitions against imagining his physique, we still have a living picture of him in the mind's eye. Contemporary studies, such as one from 2020 led by researchers at Stanford, have shown that in the United States God continues to take the form of an old bearded white man. He reaches out to us from chapel ceilings, reveals himself in Google image searches, and teases us in pop lyrics.

It may be that God is just a slob like us, but because he created man in his own image, anthropomorphism is always political. God's body is our battleground. In the late nineteenth century, as mass-produced religious imagery of a white Christ flooded America, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner declared that God has black skin. When a newspaper editorial attacked him, the bishop, who had been appointed by Lincoln as the first Black chaplain to the Union Army's troops, replied, "We do not believe that there is any hope for a race of people who do not believe that they look like God."

From this standpoint, Stavrakopoulou's investigation takes on greater significance. What would it mean to have a more "accurate" portrait of what God in the Bible actually looks like? Would it alter our sense of who should reign on earth? The corpse still has a pulse, and it is our own.

On a silver coin from Judah now held in the British Museum, dating to the fourth century BCE, Yahweh sits on a winged wheel, a popular vehicle for archaic Levantine deities. His body is lean and muscular; he has a long nose, high cheekbones, and thick, well-groomed hair pinned in curls. He sports a flowing beard, a symbol of sovereignty so ubiquitous in the ancient world that queens were known to wear prosthetic ones to mark their own power. It is unusual to find such Judaic depictions of Yahweh; the coin was likely made in a minting workshop that copied the models of other currencies featuring gods, perhaps from Egypt or Greece.

#### Advertisement

"Praise Yah, for Yahweh is good-looking!" Psalm 147 sings in Stavrakopoulou's translation. While most English translations render such exaltations as "good" or "gracious," she argues that the original Hebrew terms *tob* and *na'im* were more often used to describe things as visually attractive rather than abstractly virtuous. In her reading, when God steps back from his creation in Genesis on the sixth day to admire his work, he sees not that it was good but rather that "it was very beautiful." Our world was made to standards of beauty, not of righteousness, for God is an aesthete.

Fragments of an earlier body of poetry that made its way into books such as Deuteronomy suggest that Yahweh had begun his divine career in the Late Bronze Age, Stavrakopoulou writes, as “a minor but ferocious storm deity” dwelling in a marginal wasteland south of the Negev desert. Yet by the time the First Temple was built in Jerusalem around 950 BCE, the warrior Yahweh had not only usurped the throne of his father, El—who was often evoked as the “Bull” and who ruled a polytheistic household of deities that also included sons such as Baal and Mot—but had become him, taking on his name and attributes, including his horns. (In the Book of Numbers, the prophet Balaam exclaims, “God...has horns like a wild ox!”) “I am Yahweh,” he announced to Moses in Exodus 6:2–3. “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shadday, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.” El Shadday is often translated as “God Almighty,” but Stavrakopoulou notes that it is more correctly “El of the wilderness.”

Yahweh’s ear was depicted on other currency in circulation in fourth-century-BCE Jerusalem; the coins functioned like phones with a direct line to the deity. It was unclear whether God would listen, but his eyesight was acute: he could see everything happening in human society and could even peer past the lining of the womb into the land of the unborn. “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,” a psalmist sang. “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.” Stavrakopoulou infers that Yahweh’s eyes were lined with dark kohl, like the *udjat*, or Eye of Horus amulet found across Egypt and the Levant. His booming voice was said to raze everything in its path, breaking cedar trees in half, as Psalm 29 revealed. The purpose of incense, lit by temple priests, was so that God could smell it—it made his breath visible in the world as he inhaled and exhaled billowing tendrils of smoke.

In Mesopotamian myth, gods were said to “gather like flies” around sacrifices of meat; Yahweh shared the dietary preferences of his divine forebears. His penchant, as Abel knew, was for roasted firstborns of a flock, especially “their fatty parts,” which Stavrakopoulou glosses as “the succulent slipperiness coating the intestines, kidneys and liver, plus the spongy thickness of the lamb’s tail.” God preferred to eat his meat not only well-done but still on fire. His priests searched the flaming offerings for signs such as “the changing direction of the smoke’s progress” and “the precise moment at which incinerated-food remains collapsed on the altar,” Stavrakopoulou writes, “to discern the difference between a rejected sacrifice and the mysterious mechanics of divine consumption.” It is likely that Yahweh drank: his predecessors, such as the Sumerian god Enki, consumed wine and beer as a way of “transgressing their own cosmic rules.” A story on a fourteenth-century-BCE clay tablet from the ruins of Ugarit, in northern Syria, told of how El became so drunk at a feast that he “fell down like a corpse.”

In Genesis, God arrives in human size and is initially mistaken for an ordinary man, as when he appears to Abraham at the door of his tent and shares a meal of a tender calf, or when he wrestles with Jacob, dislocating his thigh. In Exodus, he gives precise toilet instructions to the fleeing Israelites, lest he step in human feces, “because Yahweh your god walks in your camp.” The Book of Chronicles relates that he likes to put his feet up on the Ark of the Covenant, using it as his footstool.

The temple built by King Solomon in Jerusalem provided a physical residence for Yahweh, yet

with its destruction in 587 BCE the idea became commonplace among his exiled worshipers that God “could voluntarily abandon a temple” and the world would still be filled with his presence and power. After the Babylonian conquest, Stavrakopoulou writes, material renderings of Yahweh came to be seen “as religiously dangerous”; they were too fragile, too vulnerable to an attack, and, worse, they constrained and immobilized “an increasingly transcendent deity.” He still received offerings of dinner at the altars of the Second Temple, built in 516 BCE, but Yahweh was becoming more aloof, and around the same time the prohibition of graven images entered the Ten Commandments.

## Advertisement

His footstool grew—it became the entire earth, as Isaiah revealed—to accommodate God’s increasingly cosmic-sized feet, as he sat enthroned in a heaven ever more distant from earth. As preserved in the Shi‘ur Qomah (Measurement of the Body), a set of anatomical calculations that circulated by the twelfth century CE, Jewish mystics tried to measure his feet. Taking Isaiah’s claim as their benchmark, they determined that the length of his soles was approximately 90 million miles.

They used the figure to illustrate that God’s body was ultimately incomprehensible to the human mind. To repeat such numbers in an incantation, again and again, was thought to induce a trancelike state in the mystic.

Seeking an uncensored view of God’s physique, Stavrakopoulou renders scriptural verse in a way that tends to be unpoetic. “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, tall and lofty!” cries Isaiah in her translation. “His lower extremities filled the temple!” While the Hebrew term *shul* is nearly always translated reverently as “the train of his robe,” Stavrakopoulou argues that it is more often deployed by biblical authors “to pointedly allude to the fleshy realities of the sexual organs.” Entering the inner sanctum at Jerusalem, hit with a rush of smoke and fiery seraphim wings, Isaiah is flashed by God.

The priest Ezekiel also caught a glimpse. In a vision from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, Ezekiel sees Yahweh atop a chariot of lapis lazuli:

Upward from what looked to be his *motnayim*, I saw it sparkling like amber, it seemed to be enveloped all around by fire. And from his *motnayim* downward I saw something like fire. And brilliance surrounded him. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, this was the appearance of the brilliance all around.

The god El; bronze statue with gold overlay, Syria

National Museum of Syria, Damascus/Interfoto/Alamy

The god El; bronze statue with gold overlay, Ugarit, near Latakia, Syria, late fourteenth century BCE

The Hebrew *motnayim* is usually translated as “waist” or “loins” but more correctly refers to the

genitals, Stavrakopoulou writes. While for humans the genitals must be concealed, here is a vision of God in which everything is hidden except the private parts, as if to underscore the difference between mortal and divine. (Stavrakopoulou does not draw distinctions between images of God seen in visions or dreams versus more concrete encounters.)

For rabbinic commentators, the penis posed a problem. If Adam was made in the image of God, and Adam was circumcised, then God too must have had his foreskin removed—but who circumcised God? An ancient Phoenician myth, preserved by the second-century-CE writer Philo of Byblos, reported that El (like Abraham) took matters into his own hands. In a different, Ugaritic version, El left it to horticultural specialists—experts at pruning grape vines—in preparation for consummating his marriage.

Like his predecessor, Yahweh had a wife: her traces still pervade the scriptures. El was wedded to the powerful Athirat, a goddess worshiped across the Levant who had birthed seventy divine sons and breastfed human kings. Taking her Hebrew name, Asherah, she became Yahweh's consort. Several inscriptions from the eighth century BCE convey blessings from "Yahweh and his Asherah" at sites such as Khirbet el-Qom in the West Bank, where the words grace a burial chamber laid out as a bedroom for the dead. There is evidence that Solomon's temple in Jerusalem housed her cult statue and that her sacred tree was planted next to Yahweh's altars. The word asherah occurs in the Hebrew Bible forty times, but it is often rendered in English as "grove" or "sacred pole."

With the building of the Second Temple came an era of theological reform. As Stavrakopoulou writes:

The traditional polytheism of the past was remodelled in the image of what is sometimes described as an "emergent monotheism," but is more accurately understood as a radical form of pantheon reduction: Yahweh lost his wife, while other members of his divine council were downgraded from deities to minor divine beings, heavenly messengers, or cosmic abstractions.

Asherah was branded a prostitute, a temptress who led Yahweh's followers astray, or she was entirely suppressed by biblical scribes. The Hebrew rendering of her name was mispronounced to sound like "shame." Yet she is still present in an incantation in Genesis under her sobriquet, Breasts-and-Womb, and appears in ritual depictions in Jeremiah in which women burn incense to "the Queen of Heaven."

Stavrakopoulou draws links between Asherah and Eve based on common epithets and the language of Genesis 4:1. It leads her to the unexpected claim that it was Yahweh, rather than Adam, who fathered Cain. Rejoicing at the birth, Eve declares that she has "acquired" or "gotten" a child with the "help" of the Lord, as her words are conventionally translated. The scholar David Bokovoy has demonstrated how linguistic evidence more strongly supports the meaning that she has "procreated...with Yahweh," capturing a sense that the deity had an active part in human conception. Stavrakopoulou takes this further to suggest sex in the Garden between God and Eve but leaves the idea dangling, like a piece of forbidden fruit as yet unripe.

Yahweh reveals himself as “a powerful sexual predator,” she writes, in passages that biblical scholars tend to label “pornoprophetic” and that bring us to the limits of Stavrakopoulou’s method. In Ezekiel, God finds Israel in the form of an infant girl, with umbilical cord still protruding, covered in the blood of childbirth, and left in the wilderness. The deity rescues her, then notices her again when she has grown breasts at puberty. “You were at the age for lovemaking,” Yahweh recalls of her nakedness. “You became mine.” When his bride is unfaithful, the divinity commits acts of gruesome sexual violence. While second-century-CE rabbis banned these verses from synagogues, early Christian interpreters refused to see God in the lines at all. As the theologian Origen wrote:

Let them give an opinion on this, I ask: Jerusalem has breasts, and at one time they are not bound, and at another they are made firm, and she has an umbilical cord and is reproached because “it was not cut.” How is it possible to understand these things without allegorical interpretation?

One might wonder the same watching the strip search of God. In her section on genitals, Stavrakopoulou arrives at a portrait of God as “a predatory alpha male” who has sanctified millennia of misogyny. “The biblical God cannot and should not be let off the hook,” she writes in a presentist and activist mode. She connects the girth of Yahweh’s biblical penis in the Book of Habakkuk to our own “cultural phallocentrism,” and recounts how Donald Trump taunted Kim Jong-un over the larger size of his nuclear button. Her descriptions of ancient “alpha masculinity”—“a rock-hard erection, powerful jets of semen...an insatiable libido and penetrative domination”—could have come from Reddit. Yahweh, she later repeats, was “the paradigmatic alpha-male,” but the alpha male is only a figment that sprang out of zoology into mass consciousness about forty years ago. God’s body, in this chapter, resembles a cartoon of our own present-day supreme beings.

For rabbinic sages, God’s male body, rather than endorse a bellicose masculinity, challenged the idea of human manhood itself. As Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has shown in his study *God’s Phallus*, in ancient Jewish societies in which sex acts between men were harshly punished, the sexual metaphors for capturing God’s bond with Israel put male worshipers in an impossible homoerotic position. If male–female is the pairing of religious devotion, human women become the natural lovers of a male God, rendering human men as irrelevant as Joseph would be to Jesus’ birth—or perhaps as irrelevant as Adam was to Cain’s. This tension, Eilberg-Schwartz argues, contributed to the feminization of men in rabbinic thought, fostering a soft, unwarlike ideal type that the scholar Daniel Boyarin has sought to reclaim as “the eroticized Jewish male sissy.”

These other masculinities are also present in God, but they appear at a distance from the divine “phallic warrior.” Had Stavrakopoulou placed them in dialogue with one another, it might have deepened her portrait of God’s manhood and the complexity of its consequences for how men ought to live on earth. Because God is organized as an anatomical diagram, it is by nature reductive, to each body part. It risks oversimplifying biblical lines, so often read and interpreted toward contradictory ends.

Scholars in the second century CE such as the Rabbi Yohanan deduced that the deity dressed in a

rabbinic style, covering his shoulders with a fringed shawl or tallit, still worn today by observant Jews. Each week God kept Shabbat with his angels, as the Book of Jubilees revealed. He joined study groups that labored to parse his sacred word. Drawing on evidence in Deuteronomy and other scriptures, the fourth-century-CE Rabbi Avin inferred that God also wore tefillin, small, talismanic boxes containing Torah verses and bound with leather straps to the upper arm and forehead. God prayed—“May it be My will”—and offered sacrifices to himself, often amid human war. He wept for tragedies that he had caused.

The Talmudic treatise *Avodah Zarah* described God’s daily schedule, which included late mornings first spent “judging the entire world,” then turning to mercy when God realized—as if anew each day—humanity’s hopeless self-destructiveness. While in the afternoons God did the tiring work of giving sustenance to all creatures, in the evenings he would relax with his pet sea monster. “There is the sea, great and wide...and Leviathan whom you formed to play with!” exclaims Psalm 104. Although God delighted in his monster, it was said that Leviathan was destined to turn from pet to food. Several texts written in an apocalyptic moment, after the destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the first century CE, describe how, when God gathers the righteous for a last supper, the sea serpent will be served as the messianic meal. Drawing on a verse in Job, the rabbis determined that Leviathan is a kosher fish, “for it is written: ‘His scales are his pride.’”

But what of God’s skin? In the summer of 1890 the Lakota holy man Black Elk received a vision of a divine man with markings in the palms of his hands, an eagle feather tucked into long hair, and skin painted red. The encounter occurred during the ghost dance at Wounded Knee Creek, only a few months before the massacre of hundreds of Lakota people by US soldiers. Of all possible shades of the divine, what Black Elk saw comes closest to what Stavrakopoulou argues was the original complexion of God in the Bible. As attested by a terracotta divinity dated to around 1850 BCE and unearthed in the Sumerian city-state of Ur, red was once the hue of cosmic bodies across Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant. Crimson pigment made things come alive: it transformed objects into animate beings or resurrected them, from the red painted onto neolithic skulls to the red resin used in Egyptian mummification rituals. The color embodied a certain “warrior erotica,” as human fighters stained their bodies red before battle. “My beloved is radiant and ruddy,” declares the Song of Songs, exalting a body so sublimely perfect that early rabbis supposed it could only belong to God himself.

“While I was staring hard at him, his body began to change and became very beautiful with all colors of light,” Black Elk related, “and around him there was light.” This shifting from redness into incandescence recalls the changing qualities of divine skin in the ancient world. From around 1000 BCE “the dazzling, blazing radiance of the gods’ bodies had come to be a defining characteristic of divinity,” Stavrakopoulou writes. The Assyrians called this glowing aura of fire the *melammu* and depicted it in iconography as abstract, wavy lines emanating in a circle. It was hot enough to boil water: the warrior goddess Ishtar boasted, “My *melammu* cooks the fish in the sea.” In Hebrew the word is *kabod*, the brilliant glory to which Ezekiel was exposed in his *prīapic* vision. At the peak of Mount Sinai, Moses begged to see the *kabod* and was given a view of God’s hindquarters so luminescent it transfigured Moses’s face. Across the testaments,

Yahweh appears, as in Psalm 104, “wrapped in light as with a garment,” a searing glare that is, Enoch related, too bright even for angels to look at. When Yahweh dined on sacrificial meat still on the grill, his own fieriness engulfed the flaming food.

In Greek the word is *doxa*, and in the New Testament it describes Jesus’ illuminated splendor, the blinding light that converted Paul. With the idea of the Trinity, God became ever more incorporeal, as Jesus’ incarnate body in many ways took the place of his father’s. God had grown old in the dreams of the writer Daniel: in the second-century-BCE text, Yahweh appears for the first time as “the Ancient of Days.” Daniel witnesses the elderly deity seated on a fiery throne, with hair “like lamb’s wool” and dressed in robes “white as snow.” In the visions of John of Patmos in Revelation, the heavenly son resembles his father: “His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow.” The phrase “white as snow” conveys both purity and disease in the scriptures. It appears several times in the Old Testament to describe leprosy: Yahweh temporarily turns Moses’s hand “leprous as snow”; Moses’s sister Miriam becomes “leprous, white as snow;” a servant in the Second Book of Kings meets the same fate. The association with skin lesions contrasts the crystalline perfection of divine and angelic bodies, which are, in the New Testament, often described as white. The Gospel of Mark evokes a hue beyond any human manufacture: when Jesus stands at the peak of a mountain, “his clothes became dazzling white such that no one on earth could bleach them.”

As Christian theologians forged an embattled new faith, the radiant *doxa* of Christ was frequently pitted against symbols of darkness and sin. While in Jewish and Greco-Roman societies dark skin “might be variously identified with beauty, majesty and wealth, as well as foreignness, erotic exoticism, or xenophobic danger,” Stavrakopoulou writes, it would become “a means of colouring sinners in need of Christian salvation.” While the priest Jerome caricatured “Ethiopians” as “black and cloaked in the filth of sin,” the Alexandrian pope Athanasius imagined the devil as a small black child. In the religious art of Western Europe, “the golden hues of Christ’s divinity were increasingly concentrated in his halo, while his skin grew ever lighter and whiter.” It was this white-skinned Christ who presided over the genocide and enslavement of people across the earth, as Christian conversion was used to sanctify acts of dispossession, exploitation, and brutality in the building of European and American empires. Stavrakopoulou deftly captures how a primeval theology of light has given way to our present-day divinity of whiteness. It is a shame she buries her analysis between sections on the belly and the bowels.

The effect of God’s alleged whiteness “is contemptuous and degrading,” argued Bishop Turner in a prescient 1898 response to his critics. It is not simply that the racialization of God’s body acts as a metaphor for supremacist ideologies: the images themselves possess a disconcerting power. A 2017 experiment at Tufts demonstrated this: over a hundred white Americans were subliminally exposed to different images before answering a set of survey questions. In their responses, the group primed with portraits of a white Jesus displayed significant increases in anti-Black racism than those who had seen pictures of a Black Jesus, which had no discernable prejudicial effects. Stavrakopoulou’s postmortem is an illuminating thought experiment, but the white God who lives among us simply rises from her autopsy table and walks away.