God's Body and the Material Turn: Divine (Im)Materiality in Biblical Theophanies*

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Abstract

Although biblical scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the question of God's body, few clarify how precisely this "body" complicates the long-held claim that God is immaterial. The present article addresses this oversight by attending to the ways in which biblical accounts of God's body intersect with wider tradents of thought on materiality and immateriality, including, above all, the recent cross-disciplinary "turn" known as new materialism. The article begins by discussing what biblical scholars mean when they say "God's body" and how biblical theophanies in particular complicate the belief that God is immaterial. It then discusses new materialism and how key emphases in this scholarly shift similarly complicate the belief in God's immateriality. Third and finally, the article returns to biblical theophanies by reading these accounts through a new materialist lens, focusing in particular on God's manifestations in material, nonhuman forms. In the end, I suggest not only that biblical theophanies problematize traditional ways of conceiving God within the history of biblical interpretation but also that new materialism can better enable us to see how these accounts portray the relationship between God and embodied materialities.

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Introduction

Since the 2009 publication of Benjamin Sommer's landmark book *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, an increasing number of biblical scholars have started turning their attention to the question of God's body.[1] While this has become an important site of conversation within biblical studies and other fields that focus on the ancient world, the question remains, what do biblical scholars mean when they say "God's body"? Do they mean that God *has* a physical, material body? And, if this is the case, how does such a claim make sense in light of the prevalent belief that God is an immaterial being—a being, in other words, who *lacks* a physical body? As we shall see, biblical scholars do not typically argue that God has a default material body in some sort of ontological sense.[2] At the same time, biblical scholarship on divine embodiment still challenges long-held assumptions that God is immaterial and completely "Other" from material creation. Such assumptions concerning God's immateriality are evident in a wide range of biblical interpretations, both ancient and modern, and are due in large part to the development of what would become known as classical theism, or traditional

[1] Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (ed. S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim; New York: T&T Clark, 2010); Anne K. Knafl, *Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch* (Siphrut; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014); Mark S. Smith, *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Andreas Wagner, *God's Body: The Anthropomorphic God in the Old Testament* (trans. Marion Salzmann; London: T&T Clark, 2019; trans. of *Gottes Körper. Zur alttestamentlichen Vorstellung des Menschengestaltigkeit Gottes* [Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2010]); Tyson L. Putthoff, *Gods and Humans in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Charles Halton, *A Human-Shaped God: Theology of an Embodied God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021); Silviu Nicolae Bunta, *The Lord God of Gods: Divinity and Deification in Early Judaism* (PHSC 35; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2021); Brittany E. Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (New York: Knopf, 2022); Deborah Forger, *The Knowing Body: God's Form in Jewish Antiquity*, forthcoming. Of course, Sommer was not the first biblical scholar to take up this question. See, for example, the following important monographs: Ulrich Mauser, *Gottesbild und Menschwerdung: Eine Untersuchung zur Einheit des Alten und Neuen Testaments* (BHT 43; Tübingen: Mohr, 1971); Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Stephen D. Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Esther J. Hamori, *"When Gods Were Men": The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (BZAW 384; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008). See also Christoph Markschies's important work on this topic in late antiquity in *God's Body: Jewish, Christian, and Pagan Images of God* (trans. Alexander Johannes Edmonds; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019; trans. of *Gottes Körper* [München: C. H. Beck, 2016]).

[2] Stavrakopoulou's discussion of God's body comes the closest to this position.

theistic understandings of God within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to classical theism, God's being or "essence" is not only immaterial but also impassible, immutable, atemporal, and simple (in that God cannot be composed of multiple parts).[3] Because of these divine characteristics (or, more accurately, negative attributes), classical theism also holds that God cannot have a body given that a body is typically material, has various parts, and so forth. Classical theism and the metaphysics that undergird it came under attack with the modern period, but the belief in God's immateriality is still widespread to this day and continues to shape interpretations of biblical texts in ways often unrecognized.[4]

Yet while scholarship on God's body acknowledges that biblical interpretation often assumes God's immateriality, it rarely discusses how portrayals of divine embodiment in the Bible *specifically* complicate the persistent view that God is immaterial.[5] Moreover, scholarship on God's body also does not discuss how recent cross-disciplinary conversations concerning the nature of materiality itself can illuminate biblical portrayals of divine embodiment. This current methodological shift, known as the material turn or "new materialism" not only radically reorients the metaphysical assumptions that inform classical theism, but it can also help us recognize the conceptual gap between biblical and classical theistic accounts of the divine.[6] In this article, therefore, I address this twofold omission by attending to the threads that connect biblical accounts of God's "body" with wider tradents of thought on materiality, immateriality, and the significance of material bodies. In doing so, I hope to illuminate how a new materialist approach can reveal aspects of God's biblical representations that have been occluded in the past, particularly God's relationship to bodies and material creation.

To explore this relationship, I limit my discussion in this article to three main focal points. I first survey how biblical scholarship on divine embodiment uses the

[3] For an overview of classical theism and its key thinkers, see the essays in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher; New York: Springer, 2012), esp. 95–193. On neo-classical theism and how it understands God with respect to these divine attributes, see 197–259.

[4] On how the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science signified a shift away from a focus on the immaterial to the material to the point where immateriality became "a gulf that separates modern from ancient and medieval thinkers," see Stephen H. Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) esp. 32–33.

[5] Scholars such as Hamori, Sommer, Smith, Markschies, and Halton discuss God's relationship to materiality in a variety of ways, but it is not the primary aim of their respective works. See, however, Daniel O. McClellan's discussion of God's "presencing media," or the material mediation of the divine presence, in the Hebrew Bible in *YHWH's Divine Images: A Cognitive Approach* (ANEM 29; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022).

[6] For an overview of new materialism and materialist approaches, see Christopher N. Gamble, Joshua S. Hanan, and Thomas Nail, "What is New Materialism?," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 24 (2019) 111–34. Note, though, that not all scholars who exemplify materialist approaches identify with the label "new materialism." Among biblical scholars who work on God's body, Halton frequently reflects a materialist approach, even though he does not explicitly engage new materialism.

phrase "God's body" and how biblical theophanies especially problematize the idea that God is immaterial. I next provide a brief overview of new materialism and how key emphases within new materialism likewise problematize the belief in God's immateriality. Third and finally, I discuss how new materialism reveals the complex relationship between God and material creation in biblical theophanies in ways that have been previously overlooked. In the end, I suggest that a new materialist approach to God's body better enables us to see how God is (and is not) material in theophanic accounts. I thus argue that at least some biblical portrayals of God are, ironically, more consonant with the current turn toward materiality than with the long-held theistic interpretation of God as an immaterial, disembodied being. But first, let us begin with recent work on God's body in the field of biblical studies.

"God's Body" in Relation to Materiality

Confusion can quickly arise when biblical scholars talk about "God's body" because scholars do not always use this phrase in the same way. At the heart of the confusion is the term "body" itself, for biblical scholars define what constitutes a "body" differently, if they define it at all. Of all the various definitions, Benjamin Sommer's has garnered the most attention and is perhaps the most controversial. In *Bodies of God*, Sommer explains that he understands "a body" to mean "something located in a particular place at a particular time, whatever its shape or substance."[7] While some biblical scholars, such as Charles Halton, adopt Sommer's definition, others have taken issue with Sommer's understanding of the body, maintaining that it is too broad.[8] Mark Smith, for instance, observes that Sommer's definition might include all sorts of non-living objects not usually regarded as bodies, and he further argues that it discounts the central role that the *human* body plays in biblical anthropomorphism.[9] Smith, along with Anne Knafl, instead prefers the definition of "body" provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which reads: "the physical or material frame or structure of man or of any animal."[10] I take a different approach and follow (with a number of emendations) the definition of the well-known "body studies" scholar Chris Shilling, who defines the body as "emergent material phenomena" that shapes and is shaped by its social environment.[11] I prefer starting with Shilling's definition because it helpfully captures both the biological

[7] Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 2, definition originally in italics.

[8] Halton, *A Human-Shaped God*, 57.

[9] Smith, *Where the Gods Are*, 14.

[10] Ibid.; Knafl, *Forming God*, 72. Smith also cites the *American Heritage Dictionary*, which defines a body as "the entire material structure and substance of an organism, especially of a human being or an animal" (*Where the Gods Are*, 14). See also Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*, 60; Wagner, *God's Body*, xv–xvi, 1–7. Cf. Putthoff, *Gods and Humans*, 3–7; McClellan, *YHWH's Divine Images*, 21–73, esp. 26–27.

[11] Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 14–18, here 14; Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (3rd ed.; Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2012) xii. See also Markschies's brief survey of "body history" in *God's Body*, 13–18.

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materiality of bodies and the social forces that configure and construct bodies, elements that are missing from the definitions in *Bodies of God* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Because of these different definitions of the term "body," biblical scholars, to no surprise, describe God's body differently. Sommer, for example, maintains that, in some biblical texts, God has a fluid self (or "divine fluidity") that inhabits different bodies—bodies that can include things that we today often consider to be inanimate, such as rocks. This is why Sommer can refer to God's "rock body"—or God's material instantiation in rocks—and why he uses the terminology of God's "bodies" (plural). Many ancients conceived of God or the gods as having the ability to embody physical objects, and this belief, Sommer argues, can also be seen within the pages of the Hebrew Bible (a point to which we shall return).[12] Smith and Knafl, on the other hand, focus primarily on God's *anthropomorphic* depictions (or verbal descriptions of God's human form).[13] Smith discusses theriomorphic depictions of God as well (and note that his definition of a body refers to both humans and animals), but when he does so, he highlights the intersections between God's human and animal forms, and he ultimately underscores the centrality of the human body in biblical accounts of God.[14] I too consider God's anthropomorphic depictions (and to a lesser degree, God's theriomorphic depictions), but I also discuss God's visibility and concrete manifestations more broadly.[15] Furthermore, I would add that the conversation becomes even more complicated when we consider that the ancients often regarded as "bodies" many objects (like stones) or natural phenomena (like the cosmos) that we do not necessarily regard as bodies today.[16] As these examples evince, discussions of what constitutes God's "body" vary depending on how one conceives of the "body" in the first place.

Regardless of these different definitions, many of the above biblical scholars clarify that the Bible does not always portray God's body (however that is conceived) as a material body. Sommer notes that while some biblical passages indicate that God's body is material, many other parts of the canon do not.[17] Smith identifies

[12] Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 44–57.

[13] Smith, *Where the Gods Are*; Knafl, *Forming God* (note the subtitle of Knafl's book: *Divine Anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch*). See also Smith's more popular-level book, *How Human is God? Seven Questions about God and Humanity in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014). Halton likewise focuses on God's "human shape," though not exclusively (*A Human-Shaped God*).

[14] Smith, *Where the Gods Are*, esp. 13–14, 54–57.

[15] Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 14–18, esp. 16–18.

[16] For ancient philosophical understandings of what constituted a body, see Richard Sorabji, *Matter, Space, and Motion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) 3–122. For depictions of the cosmos as a living being with a spherical body, see, e.g., Diogenes Laertius, *Vit*. 7.139–140 and of the cosmos with a body and soul, see, e.g., Plato, *Tim*. 28B; 30B–D; 32C–34B.

[17] Sommer, for instance, notes that God's "Glory" is anthropomorphic but not necessarily material: "In modern terms, we might tentatively suggest that this body was made of energy rather than matter . . . [B]ecause the divine body according to this conception is not necessarily made of the same sort of matter as a human body, it might be appropriate to term this belief a nonmaterial conception of God" (*Bodies of God*, 2; cf. 71). See also, however, the conversation below regarding

three main categories when it comes to understanding God's body, describing the first of God's three "bodies" as a material body, the second as luminous but not physical, and the third as partaking of a bodily form but with an unclear physicality.[18] I likewise highlight how biblical texts are typically unclear (or silent) when it comes to the substance of God's body, even though I caution that such ambiguity does not mean that God's various forms of embodiment lack a connection to materiality.[19] As these discussions demonstrate, corporeality and materiality are certainly linked in the ancient world, but they are not always one and the same (which is why I note that Shilling's definition of the body as "emergent material phenomena" does not always apply to God's "body").[20] What biblical scholarship on God's body makes clear, therefore, is that the Bible itself is not always clear about whether God's manifestations are—or are not—material.

Nevertheless, despite such reticence, biblical accounts of God's body still complicate a neat division between God and materiality, for, as the above scholars note, there are at least some texts that portray God's body in material terms. Of all these texts, biblical theophanies provide the clearest complication of the God/materiality binary since theophanies in effect grapple with the form of God's appearance to others within the narrative. Theophanies are thus distinct from other descriptions of God, including the wider phenomenon of divine anthropomorphism, because theophanies depict God's visible manifestation in a manner that other characters can encounter.[21] That is to say, since theophanies depict the *manifestation* of God's form, such occurrences likewise raise the question of the *substance* of God's form. While not all theophanies clearly communicate the substance of God's manifestation, a number do indicate that the manifestation is material. Of these, the two most famous are when God appears in the form of an *ish* or "man" in Gen 18 and 32, or what Esther Hamori calls the "*ish* theophanies."[22] In the *ish* theophanies, God is identified as an *ish* and performs very human, bodily activities, such as eating a meal prepared by Abraham and Sarah and participating in a wrestling match with Jacob.[23] Given that God interacts with humans in a bodily (and indeed, human)

light and God's body of "Glory."

[18] Smith, *Where the Gods Are*, 13–30. This chapter draws from his article "The Three Bodies of God in the Hebrew Bible," *JBL* 134 (2015) 471–88.

[19] Wilson, *Embodied God*, 17.

[20] Ibid. On how corporeality does not always equate to a material body in the ancient world, see Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 6–15. On the range of ancient philosophical views regarding the body and its relationship with matter, see Sorabji, *Matter, Space, and Motion*, 3–122.

[21] James Barr makes this point in his landmark essay, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament," in *Congress Volume: Oxford 1959* (VTSup 7; Leiden: Brill, 1960) 31–38.

[22] Hamori provides the most in-depth discussion of these theophanies. See *"When Gods Were Men,"* esp. 1–25, 65–128. See also, e.g., Gen 3:8–21; Exod 33:21–23.

[23] On how one of the "three men" is God in Gen 18 and how "the man" is God in Gen 32, despite attempts to argue otherwise in the history of interpretation (cf. Hos 12:3–4), see Hamori, *"When Gods Were Men,"* 1–25.

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form, it is difficult to dismiss these accounts as being metaphorical—a traditional interpretative move when it comes to anthropomorphic depictions of God in the Bible more broadly.[24] Because Gen 18 and 32 portray these divine-human encounters as realistic events that involve God eating and having a body that can be grasped and even wrestled with for an extended period of time, it is hard to escape the sense that these theophanies are "literal" embodiments.

To be sure, various interpretations have emerged over the years to explain how these theophanies in Genesis and beyond do *not* convey God's embodied materiality. Interpreters like the Jewish philosopher Philo have made this claim from as early as the first century CE, and they go to great pains to emphasize that, despite appearances to the contrary, biblical texts do not portray God as a corporeal or material being.[25] According to Philo, biblical theophanies were actually noetic experiences, for the recipients, Philo argues, did not see God in a bodily sense but in a cognitive sense.[26] Some early Christian interpreters, such as Origen, likewise have a noetic interpretation, whereas others, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, maintain that when humans saw God in theophanies, they were actually seeing Jesus, or "the Son," and not God "the Father."[27] According to these two interpretive approaches, which occur in various iterations throughout the history of interpretation, God does

[24] For a helpful critique of this traditional move, see Halton, *A Human-Shaped God*, 39–51. However, for a nuanced understanding of how to understand these passages as literal embodiments (discursively speaking) that can still be read in a metaphorical (or an analogical) manner (and thus in a way that still coincides with classical theistic sensibilities), see Hamori, *"When Gods Were Men,"* 53–64.

[25] See Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015) 65–77. Philo, for example, underscores that God does not need a mouth, tongue, or windpipe (*Decal*. 32) nor require any body parts whatsoever (*Post*. 3–4). Note that other Jewish interpreters, such as Aristobulus (2nd cent. BCE), also argue that divine anthropomorphisms should not be taken literally (*OTP*, 2:837–41; Sheridan, *Language for God*, 61–65).

[26] See, for example, Philo, *Mos*. 1.65–70; *Mut*. 1–9; *Post*. 13–16, 167–69; Jaeda C. Calaway, *The Christian Moses: Vision, Authority, and the Limits of Humanity in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 2; Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019) 34–44.

[27] See, e.g., Origen, *Princ*. 2.4.3; Justin Martyr, *Apol*. 1.62–63; *Dial*. 56–60; 126–129; Irenaeus, *Epid*. 44–47; *Haer*. 4.20.4–9; Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005) 71–77, 94–99; Calaway, *The Christian Moses*, esp. 86–104, 111–31, 169–90. On how Christians tended to associate theophanies with "the Son" during the 2nd to 4th cents. and how this interpretation started to shift to more noetic, figural, and trinitarian readings, see Angela Russell Christman, "'What Did Ezekiel See?' Patristic Exegesis of Ezekiel 1 and Debates about God's Incomprehensibility," *ProEccl* 8 (1999) 338–63; Kari Kloos, "Seeing the Invisible God: Augustine's Reconfiguration of Theophany Narrative Exegesis," *AugStud* 36 (2005) 397–420; eadem, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God: Augustine's Transformation of Early Christian Theophany Interpretation* (Bible in Ancient Christianity 7; Leiden: Brill, 2011); Bogdan Bucur, *Scripture Re-Envisioned: Christophanic Exegesis and the Making of a Christian Bible* (Bible in Ancient Christianity 13; Leiden: Brill, 2019). See also Nathan Chambers, "Reading Joshua with Augustine and Sommer: Two Frameworks for Interpreting Theophany Narratives," *JSOT* 43 (2019) 273–83.

not become materially manifest because God *cannot* become materially manifest.[28] Instead, God only becomes visible in the Son or "manifest" in the human mind. As Robin Jensen observes, theophanies posed a special problem for interpreters who believed that God was incorporeal, immaterial, and invisible, and such interpreters therefore took special care in explaining that these passages did not contradict God's essential immateriality.[29]

Yet, while such interpretations belie an underlying conviction in God's immateriality, scholars who discuss divine embodiment counter that many people in the ancient world in fact did believe that deities—including the God of Israel—were embodied beings or could become materially manifest.[30] Scholars such as Sommer and Hamori argue that biblical texts themselves evince this belief, with theophanies in particular indicating that God becomes manifest in the material realm and sometimes, as in Gen 18 and 32, in the form of a material being who partakes in mundane bodily activities. Moreover, as Mark Smith and I note, there are a few places in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that mention God actually having some kind of "form" (*temunah*; *eidos*; *morphē*) (Num 12:8; Ps 17:15; John 5:37–38; Phil 2:6; cf. Job 4:16).[31] In these instances, there is an assumption that God has a visible form that can be seen, and Paul even writes that Jesus, before taking the form of a slave, was in the "form" (*morphē*) of God (Phil 2:6).[32] Of course, God's form is not necessarily material in these references, and the word "form" itself is less concrete than the term "body." Nonetheless, all three of the terms used to refer to the divine form are elsewhere associated with bodies and materiality in

[28] Space prohibits a discussion of all the various interpretations of theophanies throughout their reception history. For an overview of interpretative themes that emerge in readings of theophanies among Christians from the 2nd to 5th cents., see Christman, "'What Did Ezekiel See?'"; Kloos, "Seeing the Invisible God"; Calaway, *The Christian Moses*.

[29] Jensen, *Face to Face*, esp. 71–83.

[30] E.g., Putthoff, *Gods and Humans*; Stavrakopoulou, *God*; McClellan, *YHWH's Divine Images*.

[31] Smith, *Where the Gods Are*, 48; Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 75–76; Brittany E. Wilson, "God's 'Form' in John's Gospel and Paul's Letter to the Philippians," forthcoming. *Temunah* occurs in Num 12:8; Job 4:16; Ps 17:15; *eidos* occurs in John 5:37; *morphē* in Phil 2:6. However, note that the LXX of Ps 17:15 does not retain the language of "form"; it instead has "glory" (*doxa*) (Ps 16:15 LXX). The LXX of Num 12:8 includes the language of "form" or "appearance" (perhaps better translated as "clearly" here) (*en eidei*) but says that Moses "saw the Lord's glory [*doxan*]." In the case of Job 4:16, moreover, the Greek translator changes the sentence to say that Eliphaz (or the recipient of the epiphany) did *not* see a form, as opposed to the Hebrew, which says that "a form [*temunah*] was before my face" (Job 4:16). It is also not entirely clear whether God is the subject of the epiphany in Job 4:16. (But for an argument that Eliphaz at least *claims* he has seen a full-blown theophany, see John Burnight, "Is Eliphaz a False Prophet? The Vision in Job 4.12–21," *JSOT* 46 [2021] 96–116, here 103–105.) Nevertheless, see the following LXX references to God's visible "form" (*eidos*): Gen 32:31; Exod 24:17–18; Judg 13:6 [B], 22; Ezek 1:26. Note too that in Deut 4:12 the text says that the Israelites did not *see* God's form, not that God *lacks* a form ("you could see no form [*temunah*; cf. *homoiōma* LXX]—only a voice"; cf. Deut 4:15).

[32] On how the language of God's form in John 5:37 and Phil 2:6 can suggest a visible form, see Markus Bockmuehl, "'The Form of God' (Phil. 2:6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism," *JTS* 48 (1997) 1–23; Wilson, "God's 'Form' in John's Gospel and Paul's Letter to the Philippians."

biblical texts, thus making it difficult to rule out the potential material connotations of God's own "form."[33]

Despite later interpretations, biblical texts also never explicitly say that God is "incorporeal" or "immaterial" (a not surprising occurrence since these words are foreign to the Bible).[34] Biblical texts do sometimes call God "spirit" (John 4:24) or "light" (1 John 1:5; cf. Deut 4:24; Heb 12:29) or "invisible" (Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; cf. Rom 1:20; Heb 11:27), and they also sometimes clarify that God is not like humans (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 50:21; Hos 11:9; cf. Isa 31:3; Mal 3:6).[35] But even these verses that arguably suggest God's immateriality—and have certainly been interpreted in this manner—are not necessarily as clear on this point as they appear at first glance. References to God as "spirit" are complicated because many ancients conceived of "spirit" (*ruach* or *pneuma*) in material terms as a more rarefied form of matter.[36] References to God as "light" are similarly complicated since some ancients conceived of light as a fine, fiery substance and the purest form of the cosmic element fire, as well as a physical phenomenon.[37] References to God being "invisible" (*aoratos*), while best approximating a classical theistic understanding of God, could just as easily be translated as "unseen," which

[33] *Temunah* often refers to material images being made in the "form" or "likeness" of something (Exod 20:4; Deut 4:16, 23, 25; 5:8; cf. Deut 4:12, 15), and in Ps 17:15, seeing God's "form" (*temunah*) parallels seeing God's "face." In the LXX, the meanings of *eidos* and *morphē* range from the abstract to the concrete. The more concrete connotations of *eidos* include references to a person's fine figure or beautiful appearance (or lack thereof) (e.g., Gen 29:17; 39:6; Deut 21:11; 1 Kgdms 16:18; 25:3; 2 Kgdms 11:2; 13:1; Isa 52:14; 53:2, 3; 1 Esd 4:18; Esth 2:2, 3, 7; Jdt 8:7; 11:23; Sus 7/8 Θ; 31 θ). Note too that *eidos* appears in conjunction with terms that explicitly convey materiality, such as "flesh" (*sarx*) (Gen 41:2, 3, 18, 19) and skin and bones (Lam 4:8). On the whole, *morphē* typically refers to someone's external, visual appearance in the LXX (e.g., Judg 8:18 A; Isa 44:13; Dan 3:19; 4:36 θ; 5:6, 9, 10 θ; 7:28 θ; Tob 1:13; Wis 18:1; 4 Macc 15:4). Note that many of these references likewise occur in relation to human bodies. In Daniel, for example, *morphē* refers to the face, or countenance, of King Nebuchadnezzar, King Belshazzar, and Daniel, and in 4 Maccabees, the narrator refers to how children resemble their parents in both "soul and form [*morphēs*]" (4 Macc 15:4). On the various valences of *eidos* and *morphē* in the New Testament and the Greco-Roman world, see Wilson, "God's 'Form' in John's Gospel and Paul's Letter to the Philippians."

[34] See Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 28.

[35] On the claim that no one has seen God, see John 1:18; 5:37; 6:46; 1 John 4:12, 20; 1 Tim 6:16; Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 72–77; Brittany E. Wilson, "Seeing Jesus, Seeing God: Theophany and Divine Visibility in the Gospel of John," in *Early High Christology: John among the New Testament Writers* (ed. Chris Blumhofer, Diane Chen, and Joel B. Green; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024) 53–62; Luke Irwin, *Jesus and the Visibility of God: Sight and Belief in the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[36] See Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 13–14, 104–36; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[37] On light as a body and physical phenomenon, as well as other views of light in the ancient world, see Sorabji, *Matter, Space, and Motion*, 98–99, 106–19; cf. David Park, *The Fire Within the Eye: A Historical Essay on the Nature and Meaning of Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 4–10. On the cosmic elements (including fire) as material principles, physical bodies, and the source of all that exists in the ancient world, see David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010) 69–72.

would thus suggest that God is simply unseen by most human eyes and not that God is "invisible" in an ontological sense.[38] And finally, references to God being distinct from humans typically make this distinction in order to highlight how God is not like humans with respect to specific *character traits*, whether it be lying, changing one's mind, or executing wrathful anger.[39] In other words, they are not statements that claim God is *categorically* distinct from humans.[40] With all of these typical biblical "prooftexts" for God's negative attributes, therefore, the link with immateriality and incorporeality is actually quite tenuous.

Overall, biblical scholars have different understandings of what constitutes "God's body," and they do not always identify this "body" as a material body. At the same time, they also highlight how at least some theophanies—or God's visual manifestations—indicate that God becomes materially manifest. In doing so, they stand in tension with early—and still prevalent—interpretative traditions that argue God is *dis*embodied and immaterial. They also, as we shall see, find interesting points of correspondence with new materialism and its own metaphysical framework. But before turning to these correspondences, and how this framework can help us to see God's relationship with materiality in biblical texts more clearly, it is first important to look a little more closely at new materialism itself.

New Materialism and the Immaterial God

What is new materialism, and why does it matter for scholarship on God's body? In short, new materialism, or "the material turn," is a recent, cross-disciplinary reconsideration of the metaphysical import of matter and material realities, and this turn, I believe, can help us reconsider the role matter plays in biblical theophanies.[41] The new turn toward materiality, which has gained increasing momentum since the start of the twenty-first century, currently spans numerous disciplines across the humanities and the social and biological sciences, and it has also started to make an impact within some theological circles.[42] As with other scholarly shifts

[38] See Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 73–74. 1 Timothy 6:16 comes the closest to suggesting God's "ontological" invisibility when it says that no one *is able* to see God.

[39] On Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29 in particular and the issue of God changing God's mind, see Halton, *A Human-Shaped God*, 118–20.

[40] In my estimation, the closest we get to a "category" distinction between God and humans is in Isa 31:3, when the prophet says that the Egyptians are human and not God and that their horses are flesh and not spirit.

[41] Note that what I am calling "new materialism" and "the material turn" includes a range of different movements that do not always agree with one another. See *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (New Metaphysics; Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012); Gamble, Hanan, and Nail, "What is New Materialism?"

[42] New materialism's impact on theology is evident in myriad ways. For an explicit theological engagement with new materialism, see, e.g., *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (ed. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein; New York: Fordham University Press,

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that are retrospectively labeled "turns," this particular turn critically responds to the "turn" that directly preceded it: namely, the "linguistic turn" of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. In other words, materialist approaches often critique the perceived shortcomings of postmodern—and specifically poststructuralist—approaches. For many new materialists, poststructuralism has been important in helping us understand the ways in which discourse constructs social norms and mechanisms of power and how one's social location indelibly shapes one's view of reality. Yet, while many new materialists build on insights from poststructuralism, they differ from poststructuralists in key ways. New materialists, for instance, demonstrate a revived interest in ontology and metaphysics in contrast to poststructuralism's focus on epistemology, language, and discursive representation.[43] More importantly, materialists also demonstrate a renewed interest in matter, materiality, and corporeality in contrast to poststructuralism's rejection of "nature" and biology in favor of culture and social construction.[44]

Because of this (re)turn to questions of metaphysics and materiality, however, new materialism (or what is sometimes called *post*-poststructuralism) also challenges the Platonic metaphysics that inform classical theism and traditional readings of biblical accounts of God, including biblical accounts of theophany. Early Jewish and Christian interpreters who argue that God does not become physically manifest in theophanies do so because of their adoption of Platonic beliefs concerning the superiority of the immaterial over the material and the equation of divinity with immateriality.[45] Plato maintained that incorporeal "Being" (ontologically speaking) was the highest mode of existence, and the reception of this exaltation of incorporeal Being in philosophical circles played an influential role in later Jewish and Christian conceptions of the divine, beginning with Philo in the

2017). See also, e.g., Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," *Religion and Society* 4 (2013) 58–78.

[43] E.g., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman; Anamnesis; Victoria, Australia: re.press [Open Access], 2011); Vicki Kirby, "Matter out of Place: 'New Materialism' in Review," in *What if Culture was Nature All Along?* (ed. Vicki Kirby; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) 1–25, esp. 8; Ashley Barnwell, "Method Matters: The Ethics of Exclusion," in *What if Culture was Nature All Along?*, 26–47, esp. 29.

[44] New materialist Vicki Kirby, for example, argues that culture is not in fact the opposite of nature (or biology/*physis*) since "nature" and "culture" intersect in multifaceted ways, and she maintains that a narrow focus on "culture" has even led to a "somatophobia" in some circles (e.g., "Corporeal Habits: Addressing Essentialism Differently," *Hypatia* 6 [1991] 4–24; "Foreword," in *What if Culture was Nature All Along?*, x, and "Matter out of Place," 1–25. See also Vásquez, *More than Belief*, 149–71; Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[45] Plato was likely the first Greek philosopher to coin the term "incorporeality" (*asōmatos*). On the development of the terms "incorporeality" and "immateriality" and their Platonic roots, see Robert Renehan, "On the Greek Origins of the Concepts Incorporeality and Immateriality," *GRBS* 21 (1980) 105–38.

first century and a number of the church fathers in the second and third centuries.[46] It is for this reason, therefore, that Philo, Justin Martyr, and Origen, among others, interpret biblical theophanies in the manner they do: their interpretations are in effect an apologetic attempt to correlate biblical accounts of God's (seemingly) material manifestations with philosophical views of God's immateriality.[47]

For our purposes, therefore, a comparison between new materialism and Platonism is especially helpful in terms of how they view material realities. Unlike the Platonic tendency to see bodies as somehow "less than," new materialism invests bodies—and the wider material conditions in which bodies participate—with value and meaning. Thus, instead of privileging the immaterial over the material, new materialists underscore that bodies matter and, indeed, that *matter* matters.[48] With this lens, I maintain, we can also better see that *God's* body matters. Instead of trying to "explain away" stories of God's concrete manifestations in the Bible, new materialism can help us to consider these manifestations anew.[49] In fact, new materialism can help biblical scholars recognize how our own inherited assumptions about God's immateriality have influenced how we read.

To be clear, new materialism does not provide the only alternative to the link between divinity and immateriality. There have always been exceptions to the belief in God's immateriality throughout the development of classical theistic thought, and Christoph Markschies maintains that this belief did not become theologically "mainstream" until the Middle Ages.[50] Since the Middle Ages, and especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, exceptions have continued to surface from across the theological spectrum and range from proponents of process theology and pantheism to Jewish and Christian thinkers such as Michael Wyschogrod, Yochanan Muffs, Jürgen Moltmann, Robert Jenson, and Stephen Webb.[51] Feminist

[46] See, e.g., Robert M. Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition* (BJS 69; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984).

[47] Of course, not all philosophical movements during this time period promulgated the idea of divine immateriality. Stoicism and Epicureanism, for example, were famously materialist schools of thought. Furthermore, it is also important to note that some New Testament texts, such as those that call God "invisible," lend themselves to Platonic interpretations and arguably evince Platonic views of the divine.

[48] See, e.g., Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Karen Barad, "Posthuman Performativity: Towards an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," in *Material Feminisms* (ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008) 120–54.

[49] Of course, there is scholarship before the material turn that also recognizes the importance of bodies and materiality. Such a recognition by no means begins with the 21st cent. nor is it foreign to the world of religion and theology. The body has always been crucial within both Judaism and Christianity, as well as Islam, even if the body as such has remained relatively uninterrogated as a site of critical theological inquiry until more recently. All the same, new materialist approaches exemplify a number of shared concerns that distinguish them from earlier approaches to the body, as the remainder of the section will make clear.

[50] Markschies, *God's Body*.

[51] For influential works on process theology and pantheism in the late 20th and early-21st cents., see, e.g., John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*

theologians in particular have questioned the presumed superiority of immateriality within classical theism, noting that the rejection of corporeality as a divine attribute is based on the assumption that embodiment is somehow a distortion of an ideal.[52] In my view, new materialism coincides with many of these earlier alternatives to divine immateriality, but new materialism, as the most recent reassessment of matter and materiality, also pushes these earlier arguments forward in important ways. This push, I believe, is necessary, because the notion of God as an incorporeal, immaterial being still remains so prevalent in the West that it is difficult for many theists even to consider the metaphysical possibility of God having a body or being material. Despite the efforts of feminists and other "exceptions" to the rule of classical theism, God remains for many an immaterial, invisible entity, and scholars—whether they are professed theists or not—typically read biblical accounts of God through this lens.[53]

Biblical scholars themselves often tend to read God as an immaterial being, and they also have been slow in incorporating critiques of divine immateriality, including the insights of new materialism, into their work more broadly. Although new materialism has made inroads within the field of theology, very few people within biblical studies specifically situate their scholarship in relation to the material turn (a not surprising occurrence given that biblical studies tends to be about 20 to 30 years behind what is happening in other disciplines).[54] This lack of

(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); Grace M. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003). For the other Jewish and Christian theologians listed above, see, e.g., Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Seabury, 1983); Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005); Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation: The Gifford Lectures, 1984–1985* (trans. Margaret Kohl; London: SCM Press, 1985); Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*. See also Webb's discussion of Jenson and Karl Barth (*Jesus Christ, Eternal God*, 97–101, 138–39, 209–42, 287–92), as well as his discussion of God's body in Mormon theology (or the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) (*Jesus Christ, Eternal God*, 243–70). Note, though, that some of these thinkers (such as Barth and Wyschogrod) do not go so far as to argue that God has a physical or material body, even though they talk at length about God's embodiment and anthropomorphic character.

[52] See in particular Grace M. Jantzen's discussion in *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999) esp. 128–55. She writes: "It is the disembodied nature of the . . . divine which has served as the linchpin of the western masculinist symbolic" (*Becoming Divine*, 269). On this point, see also Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015) esp. 6; Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "The Matter with Pantheism: On Shepherds and Goat-Gods and Mountains and Monsters," in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (ed. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein; New York: Fordham University Press, 2017) 157–81, esp. 161.

[53] While the examples are countless, see the following helpful discussions of this interpretative trend: Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 4–10; Halton, *A Human-Shaped God*, esp. 28–34, 115–20, 143–53.

[54] This delayed engagement with new materialism is especially the case within New Testament studies, although there are some exceptions. Stephen Moore, for example, is in the vanguard as

engagement is also the case for biblical scholars who write on divine embodiment, even though their work intersects with materialist impulses in a variety of ways.[55] For the purposes of space, the remainder of this section will briefly consider three key emphases that emerge in new materialism before turning in the final section to how these emphases shed light on God's own theophanic "bodies."

When looking at new materialism, it is first important to note that materialist approaches are not just interested in bodies and materiality but in the *agency* of bodies and materiality. Whereas postmodern approaches often situate the body as a passive entity that is shaped and controlled by larger social forces, materialist approaches emphasize how the body is an active participant in the wider material world.[56] What is more, materialist approaches challenge the Platonic assumption that matter itself is a passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning. (Indeed, according to Platonism, the immaterial Forms are active, but matter itself is passive.) Instead of understanding matter in passive terms, matter is described as an active agent that is alive, dynamic, and relational. In the words of the new materialist Jane Bennett, matter is "vibrant." (Hence the title of her often-cited 2009 book, *Vibrant Matter*.)[57] In discussing the vibrancy of matter, many materialists like Bennett turn to the biological sciences to describe how a variety of human and nonhuman materialities (such as food, inanimate things, etc.) interact with one another in a complex network of relations. (In the sciences, Bennett explains, it is especially clear that humans do not simply act upon inert, nonhuman matter. Instead, food, for example, can influence a person's mood, and even inanimate things can exert agency

usual. See, e.g., *Gospel Jesuses and Other Nonhumans: Biblical Criticism Post-poststructuralism* (ed. Stephen D. Moore; SemeiaSt 89; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017); *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (ed. Stephen D. Moore and Laurel Kearns; New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). See also George Aichele, *Tales of Posthumanity: The Bible and Contemporary Popular Culture* (MBW 65; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014); Jennifer L. Koosed, *The Bible and Posthumanism* (SemeiaSt 74; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); Maia Kotrosits, *How Things Feel: Biblical Studies, Affect Theory, and the (Im)personal* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); *Reading with Feeling: Affect Theory and the Bible* (ed. Fiona C. Black and Jennifer L. Koosed; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019); Maia Kotrosits, *Lives of Objects: Material Culture, Experience, and the Real in the History of Early Christianity* (Class 200; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); M. David Litwa, *Posthuman Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Thought: Becoming Angels and Demons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Anne Elvey, *Reading with Earth: Contributions of the New Materialism to an Ecological Feminist Hermeneutics* (Explorations in Theology, Gender, and Ecology; London: T&T Clark, 2022); Dong Hyeon Jeong, *Embracing the Nonhuman in the Gospel of Mark* (SemeiaSt 102; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023). For a recent engagement with the material turn in literature more broadly, see, e.g., *How Literature Comes to Matter: Post-Anthropocentric Approaches to Fiction* (ed. Sten Pultz Moslund, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen, and Martin Karlsson Pedersen; New Materialisms; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

[55] For an engagement with these materialist impulses, see in particular Halton's book, *A Human-Shaped God*.

[56] See, e.g., Vásquez, *More than Belief*, esp. 123–71.

[57] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). See also, e.g., Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

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over humans in complicated ways.) While postmodern approaches tend to dismiss the biological sciences as simply another socially constructed discourse within the wider mechanizations of power, materialist approaches exemplify a renewed engagement with work being done in the scientific community, and they ask how this work connects to actual bodies and biological processes. Such approaches, moreover, likewise complicate popular Platonic assumptions that matter is simply acted upon by higher forms of reality such as God or the immaterial Forms.

Second, materialist scholars do not limit their focus to human bodies but instead shift their attention to *nonhuman* bodies and materiality more broadly (a shift that is also sometimes called "posthumanism" or "the nonhuman turn").[58] This shift to the nonhuman is in part a response to poststructuralism and its anthropocentric orientation—an orientation that is evident from the fact that the "linguistic turn" concentrates on (human) language and discourse.[59] The nonhuman shift, however, is also a response to our current global ecological crisis. Scholars who evince an interest in the nonhuman often focus on environmental concerns, which is why the interdisciplinary field known as "ecocriticism" can be considered part of the material turn.[60] On one level, then, scholars who turn to the nonhuman seek to correct the common perception that nonhuman materialities (e.g., animals, plants, inorganic entities) simply exist for human consumption, and they emphasize the importance of social activism and ecological justice. But on another level, such scholars also insist that the human and nonhuman have always *co*existed, to the point where the boundaries between the human and nonhuman become indistinct. Nonhuman theorist Richard Grusin, for instance, argues that the human is characterized precisely by an indistinction from the nonhuman since all matter constantly interacts with other matter, whether in human or nonhuman forms.[61] Similarly, many affect theorists highlight the dynamic interaction between human matter and matter in general, noting that the human is irreducibly bound up with the nonhuman.[62]

[58] Note, however, that some distinguish between posthumanism and the nonhuman turn, arguing that posthumanism implies a teleological progression from the human to the posthuman (or an entity that is "beyond" human), whereas the nonhuman turn insists that the human has *always* overlapped with the nonhuman. For an overview of posthumanism, see Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). For an overview of the nonhuman turn, see Richard Grusin, "Introduction," in *The Nonhuman Turn* (ed. Richard Grusin; Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015) i–x; Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark, "Introduction: Deleuze and the Non/Human," in *Deleuze and the Non/Human* (ed. Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 1–16.

[59] See Moore, *Gospel Jesuses*, 3–9.

[60] On the connection between ecocriticism and the material turn, see Dana Phillips and Heather I. Sullivan, eds., *Material Ecocriticism*, Spec. issue of *ISLE* 19 (2012); *Material Ecocriticism* (ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (ed. Jeffrey Cohen and Lowell Duckert; Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Elvey, *Reading with Earth*.

[61] Grusin, "Introduction," ix–x; Moore, *Gospel Jesuses*, 5.

[62] Affect theory analyzes the relationship between emotions, cognition, perceptions, sensations, "pre-cognitive" bodily responses, and the molecular flows of matter and force. For key works in affect

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Third, materialist approaches maintain that these permeable boundaries between the human and nonhuman also extend to the question of agency. It is never the case that a human acts on their own, for human agency always emerges at the intersection of the human and the nonhuman since human bodies are co-constituted with the nonhuman (including the atmosphere, affects, microbes, organic food material, and so forth). Because of this intersection, agency itself is not located in a *singular* body but is spread across a *network* of actors.[63] For a new materialist, therefore, to be embodied is already to be a distributed agent. Due to these views concerning a human/nonhuman permeability, materialist approaches complicate the binary between humans and nonhumans as found in Platonic understandings of the hierarchy of creation (e.g., humans are "higher" than animals in "the great chain of being"). Materialist approaches also complicate classical theistic understandings of God (the ultimate "nonhuman") as being utterly distinct from humans and creation, as evidenced, for example, in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (i.e., the doctrine that God created matter out of nothing by speaking the cosmos into existence, thus making matter utterly dependent on—and distinct from—God's eternal immateriality).[64]

As these key emphases demonstrate, new materialism's understanding of material realities not only stands in sharp contrast to poststructuralism but also to the Platonic metaphysics that shaped classical theism and traditional interpretations of biblical theophanies. As the most recent turn to the importance of bodies and matter, new materialism provides a more expansive understanding of the relationship between materiality and divinity and reminds us that biblical texts on the whole do not share the Platonic framework out of which classical theism later emerged. In fact, new materialism can particularly illuminate biblical theophany accounts in ways that

theory, see esp. Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995) 83–109; idem, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); *The Affect Theory Reader* (ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For why affect theory should be associated with the wider nonhuman turn, see Grusin, "Introduction," i–x, esp. xvi–xviii; Moore, *Gospel Jesuses*, 5–7.

[63] On the distribution of agency throughout networks, or actor-network theory, see in particular Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (ed. Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris; Berlin: Springer, 2008), especially Tim Ingold's contribution on 209–15: "When ANT Meets SPIDER: Social Theory for Anthropods" (repr. in Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* [London: Routledge, 2011] 89–94).

[64] In this respect, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* distinguishes between God and materiality even more so than a Platonist would, for Platonists held that matter was eternal. Middle Platonists, like the Greek writer Plutarch, largely based their notion of matter's eternality on their reading of Plato's *Timaeus*, arguing that God created the world by fashioning pre-existing cosmic elements (see, e.g., Plutarch, *An procr*. 1014B–C). For why scholars today widely recognize that the classic scriptural prooftexts for creation *ex nihilo* (2 Macc 7:28; Rom 4:17; Heb 11:3) are too ambiguous in their respective narrative contexts to support the position of the *absolute* nonexistence of matter prior to creation, see Gerhard May's influential book, Creatio Ex Nihilo*: The Doctrine of Creation Out of Nothing in Early Christian Thought* (trans. A. S. Worrall; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

classical theism has obscured, and it is to these theophany accounts that we now return—this time looking at them with these new materialist emphases in view.

A Material Turn Towards God's Body

When we make a "material turn" to biblical theophanies, the close relationship between divinity and materiality becomes more apparent since accounts of theophany often evince the three new materialist emphases that I outlined in the previous section. First, the depiction of God inhabiting objects exemplifies new materialist claims concerning the vibrancy of matter. In this case, of course, *God* is the one who infuses matter, bestowing it with a divine agency and a specific, localized site where God's presence can be met.[65] I noted at the outset of this article that there was a widespread belief throughout the ancient Mediterranean that the gods inhabited the natural world, and Sommer, among others, maintains that these beliefs can be heard within the pages of the Hebrew Bible in reference to Israel's God. There are suggestions, for instance, that some biblical texts reflect the view that God can become manifest in wood and stones, as when Moses refers to God as "the one who dwells in a bush" (Deut 33:16; cf. Exod 3:1–6) or when Jacob says "this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house" (Gen 28:22).[66] According to some biblical texts, therefore, God's own self can dwell in the very things that God created if God so chooses, a dwelling that saturates at least some particular forms of matter with divine vibrancy.

More generally, however, biblical texts also point to the vibrancy of matter beyond God's manifestation in objects. Charles Halton, for example, highlights how some scriptural texts indicate that the earth is not inert matter or an inanimate "thing" since passages ranging from Genesis to the prophets to Romans imbue creation and the land with agency and the capacity for suffering, as well as redemption (e.g., Gen 4:10–14; Jer 4:19–31; Hos 4:1–3; Rom 8:19–23).[67] Though not writing on the topic of God's body, Mari Joerstad likewise points to how nonanimal nature performs actions in biblical texts, as well as how nonanimal nature displays affect and is addressed in a manner akin to a person.[68] Across the Hebrew Bible, we find

[65] Because of this localized specificity, Sommer argues that biblical traditions which depict God in this manner are not like pantheism, for God is not equally present in all things and all places. Instead, these "traditions maintain that God is literally located in some objects and not others: God is here, in this rock that has been anointed, but not there, in that one" (*Bodies of God*, 141).

[66] Ibid., 44–57. See also Putthoff (*God and Humans*, 142–46), Halton (*A Human-Shaped God*, 66–72), and McClellan (*YHWH's Divine Images*, esp. 51–73, 133–46), as well as Matthew Thiessen ("'The Rock Was Christ': The Fluidity of Christ's Body in 1 Corinthians 10.4," *JSNT* 36 [2013] 103–26), who argues that Paul takes up this tradition of God's "rock body" in 1 Corinthians 10 and interprets it christologically.

[67] On this point, see Halton, *A Human-Shaped God*, 79–80, who in turn cites Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). Wallace discusses all of the biblical passages cited above on 149–52.

[68] Mari Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Non-Humans, and the Living Landscape* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Joerstad calls biblical passages

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stones witnessing (e.g., Gen 31:48, 52; Josh 24:23–27), the ground responding to human action (e.g., Gen 4:10–12; Exod 15:12; Lev 18:24–28; Num 16:32–34), trees rejoicing (e.g., 1 Chron 16:33; Ps 96:12; Isa 14:7–8; 55:12), or the prophets exhorting nonhuman nature to listen (e.g., Isa 1:2; 34:1; Jer 6:18–19; Mic 1:2).[69] I would add that such personalistic accounts of nature continue in the New Testament.[70] When taken seriously and not dismissed as "mere" metaphor, these accounts complicate the classical theistic divide between the human and nonhuman as well as the divide between the Creator and creation.[71] It is not as though God and humans alone have agency, but instead God, humans, and nonhuman nature interact with one another in more relational ways. According to some biblical texts, therefore, creation more broadly conceived can also be "vibrant."

The second point of correlation between biblical theophanies and new materialism more specifically concerns the nonhuman. In some of the examples provided above, God can reside in materials such as bushes and stones, both of which are nonhuman (or God's "nonhuman bodies," to adapt Sommer's terminology).[72] Mark Smith likewise considers God's connection to the nonhuman when he discusses God's theriomorphic forms.[73] Smith argues that in 1 Kings some Israelites believed that God could become manifest in calf statues, even though the narrator condemns the worship of such images (1 Kgs 12:25–33), and he observes that a number of biblical texts apply theriomorphic language to God, as when God has wings like a bird (e.g., Ruth 2:12; Pss 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4).[74] Indeed, Smith notes that theriomorphic, anthropomorphic, *and* physiomorphic (or natural, nonhuman) depictions of God often intersect with one another, as when Moses's song in Deuteronomy 32 refers to God as an eagle (v. 11), a father (v. 6), and a

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that depict nonhuman nature in this manner "personalistic nature texts," and she mainly discusses these texts in relation to the field of new animism. Nonetheless, Joerstad's work has many points of overlap with what I am calling "new materialism."

[69] Ibid., esp. 65–66, 122–39, 145–54.

[70] See, e.g., Matt 6:26–30 (// Luke 12:24–28); 17:20 (// Luke 17:6); Mark 4:41 (// Matt 8:27; Luke 8:25); 11:12–14, 20–24 (// Matt 21:18–22); Luke 19:40; 23:30; Rom 8:19–23; Rev 12:12, 16; 20:11, 13. See also Michal Beth Dinkler, "The Wild Edges of Character: Creation Care in the Gospel of Luke," in *Creation Concepts and Creation Care: Perspectives from Early Judaism, Early Christianity, and Beyond* (ed. Zacharias Shoukry, Mirjam Jekel, and Ruben Zimmermann; WUNT I; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), forthcoming.

[71] Joerstad does not deny that these accounts can be metaphorical, but she stresses that they still situate nonanimal nature in personalistic terms and that the metaphors themselves point to the relationality between the human and nonhuman (*Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, 37–45).

[72] See McClellan (*YHWH's Divine Images*) for other instances of how God's presence becomes manifest in material, nonhuman media such as the ark of the covenant and the biblical text itself.

[73] Smith, *Where the Gods Are*, 54–68.

[74] Ibid., 55, 58–68. See also Joel M. LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* (OBO 242; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010); Evelyne Martin, "Theriomorphismus im Alten Testament und im Alten Orient: Eine Einführung," in *Tiergestaltigkeit der Göttinnen und Götter zwischen Metapher und Symbol* (ed. Evelyne Martin and Michael Herles; BibS[N] 129; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012) 1–36.

rock (vv. 4, 15, 18, 30, 31).[75] Such intersections, Smith argues, point to God's incomparability, but they also, I would argue, point to the connections between God and nonhuman entities, whether those forms be a "natural" thing like a rock or an animal like a bird.[76]

While many of God's theriomorphic and physiomorphic "forms" are descriptive in nature and do not refer to a theophanic manifestation, it is important to note that this is not always the case. God, as we have seen, can become physiomorphically manifest in wood and stone, but God may also become theriomorphically manifest. In the New Testament, for example, the Holy Spirit—a manifestation of God and God's presence—famously descends "as a dove" in the scene of Jesus's baptism, and, according to Luke, the Spirit specifically descends as a dove in "bodily form" (*sōmatikō eidei*).[77] While this image may function primarily as a vivid simile since the word *hōs* ("as" or "like") often acts as a particle of comparison (cf. *hōsei* in Matt 3:16), Luke's placement of the phrase "as a dove" directly after "bodily form" may indicate that "as a dove" is an appositional phrase that qualifies the kind of form in which the Spirit descends. In other words, Luke may convey the Spirit's visibly *ornithomorphic* form.[78] Regardless, all of the evangelists describe the Spirit as an entity who enters the narrative in theriomorphic terms, with Luke in particular characterizing the Spirit in both theriomorphic and somatic terms. According to the Gospel accounts, the Spirit's descent is visible and may even take the form of a bird, an image often applied to God in Israel's scriptures.[79]

In addition to God's "natural" and animal forms, God's connection to the nonhuman can also be seen via God's angelic forms. As Sommer argues, there are places in the Hebrew Bible where God becomes manifest as an angel or, more specifically, as an "angel of the Lord" (*malak Yhwh*).[80] Commentators have long noted that a number of passages overlap the angel of the Lord with God in confusing ways, to the point where it is difficult (if not impossible) to distinguish the angel from God (e.g., Gen 16:7–13; Exod 3:2–4; Judg 6:11–13). Sommer identifies the angel in such passages as a "small-scale manifestation of God" since the angel, he

[75] Smith, *Where the Gods Are*, 54–57.

[76] Ibid., 57.

[77] See Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32, as well as Gos. Eb. 4. On the Spirit as a manifestation of God, especially from the exilic period onward, see Nathan MacDonald, "The Spirit of YHWH: An Overlooked Conceptualization of Divine Presence in the Persian Period," in *Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism* (ed. Nathan MacDonald and Izaak J. de Hulster; FAT 2/61; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 95–120; Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 82–83, 111–12. Note that Matt 3:16 specifically refers to the Spirit as "the Spirit of God."

[78] Wallace, *When God Was a Bird*, 30. On how Luke specifically depicts the Spirit's dovelike form and not dovelike movement, see Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 81–82.

[79] On the depiction of God as a bird or one who offers protection under wings in Israel's scriptures, see, e.g., Exod 19:4; Deut 32:11–12; Ruth 2:12; Pss 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4; Isa 31:5; LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*. See also Wallace's discussion in *When God Was a Bird*, 25–31.

[80] Sommer, *Bodies of God*, e.g., 40–44. On the development of God's angelomorphic forms in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, see Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

argues, is a part of God, though not all of God.[81] In many of these cases, the angel appears like a human or in anthropomorphic form, but the angel, of course, is still ultimately a heavenly, nonhuman being.[82] Furthermore, there are also instances where God's angelic manifestations are *not* anthropomorphic, as when God and the angel of the Lord appear as fire in the burning bush (Exod 3:1–6; cf. Exod 14:19–20; Deut 4:24; Heb 12:29). Not only are angels nonhuman beings, but they, along with God, sometimes become manifest in nonhuman forms such as fire and light. Furthermore, God's nonhuman manifestations as fire and light, as well as "Glory," also arguably point to God's material manifestations, for a materialist—whether they be ancient or "new"—would not view light as "immaterial."[83]

New materialism, as I have argued, helps us to see how biblical theophanies, and biblical texts more broadly, bestow matter with vibrancy (whether that matter is "divinely" vibrant or not) and how they overlap God with the nonhuman. However, new materialism also enables us to broaden our understanding of divine agency. A materialist approach would thus not only argue that creation is an active agent in biblical texts but that God's own agency is inextricably enmeshed with creation. In Gen 1, for example, God initiates the work of creation but leaves its execution to the earth, for the earth is what brings forth vegetation in obedience to God's command (Gen 1:11–12).[84] Joerstad explains that the actions of God and the earth overlap and merge in Gen 1, so much so that the activity of nonanimal nature "is a constitutive element in the process of creation."[85] In this instance, creation itself participates in God's act of creating, doing so in a manner that blurs a neat division between God and creation along active/passive lines. Thus, while not a theophany per se, this example from the outset of Genesis demonstrates that God's agency can intertwine with the material world, and it may signal that the material world's participatory role occurs from the very "beginning."

Some passages, therefore, clarify that material creation participates in God's actions by responding to God's initiative (e.g., in Gen 1:11–12, God commands the earth to sprout vegetation and the earth does so in response). Other passages, however, lift up creation as the principal agent in these participatory acts and

[81] Sommer, *Bodies of God*, e.g., 41–42.

[82] On the difficulty, however, in always being able to discern the difference between angels and humans ontologically, see Wilson, *The Embodied God*, 115–20, 135–36. See also Litwa, *Posthuman Transformation*.

[83] For both ancient and new materialist views of light and fire, see Sorabji, *Matter, Space, and Motion*, 98–99; Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, esp. 36–42, 69–72. Sommer's identification of the *kabod* (or "Glory") as a divine body, therefore, is not too far off, especially if one views this *kabod* as having a "substance" of some kind (*Bodies of God*, 60; cf. *Bodies of God*, 2; Smith, *Where the Gods Are*, 14, 121–22; Stavrakopoulou, *God*, 172–83). On the difficulty in determining whether light is a substance (particle) or an accidental quality (wave) in modern discussions of light, see Park, *Fire Within the Eye*, esp. 332–34.

[84] See Joerstad's discussion of Gen 1 in *Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, 48–58, here esp. 49.

[85] Ibid., 50, here citing Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999) 13.

leave God's role more oblique. To cite just one example, the book of Acts depicts an earthquake freeing Paul and his companion Silas from prison in a manner that suggests the (shaking) earth is a—if not *the*—primary actor in the release (see Acts 16:25–34). God, to be sure, is the implied subject of this act, for the earthquake happens directly after Acts depicts Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns to God (Acts 16:25–26; cf. 16:34).[86] The prison release also recalls the programmatic scene from Luke's Gospel where Jesus connects God's action to the release of captives (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1). At the same time, the narrator only mentions the earthquake—not God—in conjunction with the physical release. God nowhere appears as the explicitly stated subject of the action, for the narrator relates that a "great" (*megas*) earthquake suddenly occurred, *with the result* (*hōste*) that the prison foundations were shaken, followed by the immediate opening of the prison doors and the unfastening of everyone's chains (Acts 16:26).[87]

A reading attuned to new materialism, therefore, would take notice of these textual details and reject the notion that God simply acts *through* the earthquake, as though the earth is a passive entity that God harnesses. Instead, a new materialist reading would maintain that God and the earthquake *together* free Paul and Silas; God is a key agent but not the sole agent and perhaps not even the main agent. Here in this "theophanic" encounter, as in numerous other biblical examples, God and nonhuman matter overlap in a way that impacts the lives of God's followers, in this instance bringing about the liberative act of freeing Paul and Silas from prison.[88] In a new materialist reading, then, divine agency—as with agency in general—cannot help but be spread across a network of actors.[89] God never acts solely on God's own, as though God were somehow in a vacuum, for God's interaction in the world involves an interaction of different actors, human and nonhuman alike.

[86] Some interpreters may further want to classify the passive verbs "were opened" (*ēneōchthēsan*) and "were released" (*anethē*) in Acts 16:26 as "divine passives" and thus identify God as the (implied) subject of the release. In this case, however, I follow scholars who question the notion that agentless passives necessarily always point to God as the implied agent (e.g., Beniamin Pascut, "The So-Called Passivum Divinum in Mark's Gospel," *NovT* 54 [2012] 313–333; Peter-Ben Smit with Toon Renssen, "The *passivum divinum*: The Rise and Future Fall of an Imaginary Linguistic Phenomenon," *Filología Neotestamentaria* 27 [2014] 3–24). Instead, agentless passives may, among other things, emphasize the *action*, not the actor. In the case of Acts 16:26, then, the passives may emphasize the *action* that occurs as the "result" (*hōste*) of the "great" (*megas*) earthquake. Regardless, it is striking that Luke forefronts the earthquake, and not God, in terms of Paul and Silas's physical release.

[87] Although one manuscript (P^{127}) does not frame the sentence as a result clause, it is difficult to ascertain the manuscript's actual reading, and insofar as we can ascertain its reading, the sentence still has the foundations being shaken after the occurrence of the earthquake.

[88] See Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, for examples from the Hebrew Bible. I thank Luke Bretherton for this example from Acts.

[89] To be clear, I am arguing for a new materialist reading of biblical *texts*, not that a new materialist must believe in a divinely metaphysical being. At the same time, since new materialism challenges the poststructuralist binary between "textual representation" and "reality," a new materialist would not necessarily be as adverse to engaging the metaphysical question of God's existence (and how a text may reflect the "reality" of that existence) as a traditional biblical scholar might be.

Because of this understanding of how agency becomes manifest, a new materialist approach to God's body brings to light the various participants of divine involvement within biblical texts and thus expands our understanding of what constitutes a theophany in the first place. When it comes to traditionally recognized scenes of theophany, moreover, a new materialist approach to God's body would also maintain that God, matter, and material bodies necessarily constitute one another. When discussing theophanies, therefore, a new materialist would not only talk about God *becoming* embodied. God does not just temporarily dwell in matter, as though material entities are passive vehicles that God possesses (per Sommer's understanding that matter is inert until God becomes manifest in it).[90] Instead, theophanies entail a dynamic, transformative interplay between God and matter. So when Moses encounters God in the fiery bush (Exod 3:1–12), for example, this theophany entails a co-constitution—or relational imbrication of being—between the bush and God. In other words, the bush is a part of the theophany itself and not just an empty "vessel" that somehow "holds" God. If God's various "bodies" are in some ways analogous to human bodies, then God's agency is also distributed across a network of other bodies. And just as human and nonhuman bodies are not singular entities that act on their own, God's bodies likewise do not operate in isolation. God's bodies are instead entangled with various other entities in a manner that blurs traditional dividing lines between God and creation and between the human and nonhuman.

In this way, I want to argue, biblical texts suggest a material vibrancy to God's own self. In scenes of divine encounter, God can be said to be "material" because interaction with the material world inevitably involves a dynamic entanglement of being. Of course, one could argue that God is the great exception to this way of being in the world. Because God is "Other," God's bodies do not always operate in the same manner as human or nonhuman bodies. This may very well be the case, but the position that God alone is a self-contained agent primarily emerges as a possibility if the reader has a prior commitment to God's immateriality, a commitment, as I outlined earlier, that biblical texts do not seem to share. Indeed, the very fact that biblical texts speak of God's "spirit" (*pneuma*) becoming manifest or even speak of God *as* "spirit" (John 4:24), indicates that readers who believed *pneuma* ("spirit") to be a rarefied form of matter very likely heard God in material terms, a point that Origen, for example, recognizes and goes to great pains to explain away (e.g., *Princ.* 1.1–9).[91] For some New Testament texts in particular, God's manifestation in the human Jesus presses God's relationship with materiality even further (e.g., John 1:1–14; Phil 2:5–11; Col 1:19; 2:9), for while later Christian doctrine would distinguish between Jesus's immaterial divine nature and his material human nature,

[90] See, e.g., Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 2, 50.

[91] On Origen's wider tendency to use allegory to argue that Scripture portrays God as incorporeal (even though Scripture never explicitly says this), see Karen Jo Torjesen, "The Enscripturation of Philosophy: The Incorporeality of God in Origen's Exegesis," in *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality* (ed. Christine Helmer; SBLSym 26; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005) 73–84.

the New Testament itself betrays no division between Jesus's "immaterial" divinity and "material" humanity.[92]

In sum, God's relationship with matter emerges more clearly when we look at biblical theophanies through a new materialist lens. Theophanies at times portray matter as vibrantly alive and the divine as a nonhuman entity. They also ascribe agency to creation and depict divine agency in distributed terms. New materialism not only brings these textual elements into sharper focus, but it also expands our understanding of what constitutes God's "body" in the first place. Biblical texts do not always depict divine manifestations as the appearance of a "self-contained," human body (as in Gen 18 and 32), for divine manifestations are dispersed across different kinds of materiality, including the human and the nonhuman. There is a "fluidity" of the divine self, as Sommer puts it, across nature, animals, angels, and/or humans: if God so chooses, God can encounter God's creatures in a variety of concrete, tangible ways. God, in fact, can encounter creatures outside of traditional theophanic scenes simply by exercising an agency which is entangled with the material world. When looking at "theophanies" as a whole, therefore, neither anthropomorphism nor even theriomorphism, can account for all of the ways in which God becomes materially manifest in biblical texts. There is instead a materiality to God by virtue of God's care for and intervention in the world.

Conclusion

In this article, I first considered the different ways that biblical scholars talk about God's body, and I then reflected on the implications of these discussions, especially with respect to classic theological claims concerning God's immateriality and the twenty-first century turn toward materiality known as new materialism. In discussing these implications, I noted that biblical theophanies in particular sit uneasily alongside a Platonic frame and that some theophanies resonate with recent reflections on materialism. I also argued that new materialism can push biblical scholarship on God's body further and provide clarity with respect to how God is and is not material, using biblical accounts of theophany as a springboard for this discussion. There is, of course, much more work to be done in fleshing out such a perspective. But I hope that my readings of biblical theophanies alongside new materialism can incite further conversation regarding materialist approaches and how they relate to the divine. I also hope that further engagement with new materialism can encourage scholars to explore how other biblical representations of God's body—and not just God's theophanic manifestations—intersect with actual bodies and material realities. Indeed, it is my hope that new materialism can open

[92] On how the development of the doctrine of Christ's "two natures" during the 2nd to 5th cents. also contributed to the gulf between immaterial divinity and material humanity, see Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*, 31–32. On this point, see also Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008) 164–81.

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up a range of readings that better reflect the ontological and agentic expansiveness that is evident in biblical texts and the ancient world more broadly.

To conclude, new materialism can help interpreters better appreciate the dissonance between biblical and classical theistic views of materiality and how some biblical texts portray God as becoming physically manifest. As we have seen, the equation of divinity with immateriality mainly arises from early Jewish and Christian engagements with wider philosophical trends such as Platonism. Biblical texts as a whole are not the obvious source of this belief and in fact cause interpretative problems for those wed to a Platonic framework, especially when it comes to theophanies. On a "literal" reading of theophanies, God does not appear as an immaterial being who is far removed from creation and wholly Other from humans and nonhumans. God is instead intimately involved in the created order and intertwines with materiality and material bodies in complex ways. In this respect, biblical depictions of how God becomes manifest in the world have more in common with a materialist point of view rather than a Platonic point of view. In contrast to the Platonism that has informed much of the Bible's reception history, new materialism can assist readers in being cautious of biblical interpretations that equate divinity with immateriality and exalt immateriality itself as an ideal. Indeed, new materialism can enable readers to return to biblical texts with fresh eyes and to recognize that the God found therein is not "above" having a body.

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