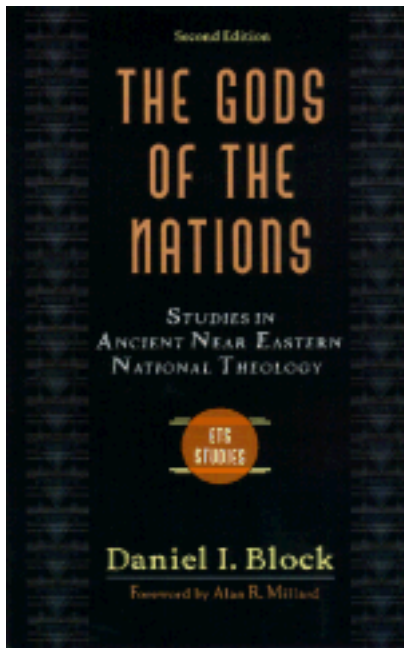


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**Block, Daniel I.**

*The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*

Evangelical Theological Society Studies

Foreword by Alan R. Millard

2d edition

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The second edition of Daniel I. Block's *The Gods of the Nations* is a reworking of his book from ten years earlier. The bulk of the changes are matters of bibliography and stylistic and typographical problems that troubled the first edition. While Block has made considerable content changes to the final chapter, the book's methods and purpose remain largely unchanged. Block's overall task is to explicate the nature of deity-nation relations in the theologies of the ancient Near East. This he does by trying to examine the theological relationships among divinities, people, and territory.

In the first chapter, Block assesses these relationships throughout the ancient Near East and even brings in classical Greek sources to make the case that the god of Israel was a god primarily attached to the people of the nation, while foreign gods were primarily thought to be attached to "real estate." Chapter 2 seeks to support this thesis further in the ancient Near Eastern epigraphic record, focusing especially on personal names and divine epithets as sources of popular religious thought. From this analysis he concludes that the theological model for deity-nation relations was one of a feudal lord and his estate. Chapters 3 and 4 assess the roles and expectations of the deity, the land, and the people

within this “feudal” arrangement. The final chapter turns to the motif of divine abandonment in Near Eastern mythology, with special attention to this theme in Ezekiel.

The greatest strength of the book is as an introduction to the epigraphic record of the Iron Age Levant and, to a lesser degree, of the ancient Near East in general. It is not recommended for those with any special interest in epigraphy. Already the bibliography is a bit outdated, and the work relies heavily on sources such as *ANET*. Nevertheless, the book does provide a friendly entrée for the nonspecialist to the epigraphic record and how it may be of use for understanding the historical context of ancient Israel.

Beyond this, however, Block’s project continues to be troubled with various methodological problems. Chief among these is Block’s tendency to take biblical attitudes toward foreign religions as accurate representations of the religious beliefs of non-Israelites. An example of this is on pages 70–71, where Block cites Deuteronomy as a source of information on foreign gods. This method strays from attempting to understand foreign religions on their own terms into the realm of theological reflection.

Related to this problem is Block’s willingness to accept biblical rhetoric as a reliable representation of the religious thought of “the Hebrews.” It is becoming increasingly common to speak of ancient Israelite *religions*, and while Block does not deny the varieties of religious expression chronicled in the Bible, he does ignore them in his conclusions about the nature of Israelite theology. An egregious example is found on pages 69–70, where all evidence for religious plurality in Israel may be wiped away by taking the Old Testament “at face value,” so that the rhetoric of “the orthodox Yahwist” is suddenly transformed into “the Hebrew view.”

Other concerns include Block’s unexamined use of texts pulled from a variety of periods and genre. He convicts himself at the beginning of the final chapter, where he says:

The Old Testament texts to which I have referred have not been uniform with respect to genre and have often been separated by hundreds of years of national development. Inasmuch as my treatment of these documents seems to disregard the evolution and progression that occurred in the nature and sophistication of Israel’s faith and their national self-understanding down through the centuries, some will judge my approach naïve. (113)

Block acknowledges this as a “weakness” but is unconvinced of any necessity to address diachronic issues in order to make his own case and is content to leave that “for another occasion, or another scholar.” Regardless of Block’s desire to dispense with such analysis, its absence is not only a weakness but a mortal blow to his project. “Searching

for answers from whatever source,” that is, without a critical examination of that source, undermines any argument.

Likewise, Block invokes the feudal model to explicate the divinity-people-land connection without any discussion of this model as a sociological construct or its appropriateness for understanding the Iron Age. This is a general problem with Block’s approach to the overall sociological concerns inherent in any study that seeks to understand “nations,” for which we are given only a dictionary definition. There is no synchronic treatment of Iron Age social structure in the places Block seeks to understand, much less one of the complexities of state formation. This is inadequate, especially given the spectrum of texts and historical periods involved, for making any kind of sound conclusions about national identity.

The absence of such analysis is felt most keenly in the division of “nation” into territory and people. The ways in which deities were associated with people or places is certainly an interesting issue and worthy of consideration, but when we are talking about national theologies, there must be some attention to the nature of ethnic identity and the concept of nationhood. Can one really say that the ancients divided population from territory in conceiving of their societies? Was a population without fixed territory considered a nation? Would uninhabited territory have been considered the domain of particular divine patrons? Such questions, both sociological and theological, are omitted.

That Yahweh was unusually if not uniquely allied with his people versus his land is not impossible, but it is virtually unarguable for two reasons. The first is that our knowledge of Levantine religious thought outside of Israel is scant. There is no Edomite Bible, for example, to tell us if Qaus might have been regarded as god of the Edomite people rather than their territory. This does not mean that Edomites did not so regard him. The evidence is insufficient to say one way or the other, so we cannot claim Yahweh’s uniqueness in this regard with any surety. A statement such as “the general silence of extrabiblical texts on the relationship between peoples and their respective territories suggests that those responsible for preserving what records we possess were disinterested in the matter” (94) is frustrating and misleading.

The second obstacle in this argument is that there is evidence to suggest that many Israelites did understand their religion to be territorially bound. What are we to make of the psalmist in 137:4 asking, “How can we sing Yahweh’s song on foreign soil?” It seems clear that some prophetic authors were striving to promote a theology of Yahweh’s universal sovereignty. However, might this not be in response to a more common belief that Yahweh and his protection would be unavailable to those in exile? Block does mention 2 Kgs 17:24–40, a problematic text for his thesis. In this story Yahweh sends a

plague of lions upon the new population brought into Samaria by Assyria because the new immigrants do not worship him. Block would like to write this off as an “alien perspective” (107), an unfortunately circular argument. He addresses neither the text’s implication that the renewal of Yahwistic worship, even syncretistic, seems to have solved the problem of the lions, nor the fact that these foreigners seem to think their foreign gods are accessible to them in their new home.

The final chapter, based on a paper Block presented in 1996, represents the bulk of the changes in the new edition. The study is a comprehensive comparison of the theme of divine abandonment in ancient Near Eastern literature with that same theme in Ezekiel. Unfortunately, this section has not been well integrated into the book as a whole. Nevertheless, it is coherent in and of itself and offers insights into Ezekiel’s use of the theme of Yahweh’s abandonment of Jerusalem and his rhetorical purpose in doing so.

The problems that undermine *The Gods of the Nations* are regrettable. The project is potentially quite useful as an introduction to the historical and cultural context of the complexities of Israelite religions, but its various difficulties prevent it from fulfilling that potential.