

DOES YAHWEH EXIST?

**A PHILOSOPHICAL-CRITICAL RECONSTRUCTION
OF THE CASE AGAINST REALISM IN OLD
TESTAMENT THEOLOGY**

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OF THE CASE AGAINST REALISM IN OLD
TESTAMENT THEOLOGY**

BY

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Hierdie studie word opgedra aan:

*swerwers sonder rigting,
soekers wat nooit vind,
want eindelijk is almal
maar net kinders
van die wind.*

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In much wisdom there is much grief.

The one who increases knowledge increases pain.

(Eccl 1:18)

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FOREWORD

“If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”

(Ps 11:3)

There can hardly be any doubt about the substantial part that biblical scholarship played in initiating the collapse of realism in Christian theism since nineteenth century. Even so, the ontological problems generated within Old Testament studies in particular seem to be something that the average religious individual of our time is completely ignorant of.

In the South African context, one need only observe how debates pertaining to God and the Bible continue to reappear in the popular media and within the Church. A deep-seated repression or ignorance must be present for, on such occasions, the theological problems of a century or more ago become “unheard of” yet again. From the ways in which both fundamentalist and critical viewpoints vie for supremacy on so many moot points of concern, one thing seems clear. Very few people really seem to have an adequate perception of just why realism in biblical theism has become immensely problematic.

On the one hand, fundamentalists and other conservative scholars show little understanding of just how and why certain popular and traditional views about the nature of the Bible have become impossible to maintain. All their calls for a return to *the* “biblical” perspective on any particular issue and the idiosyncratic manner in which favourite biblical texts are quoted to justify theological and ethical arguments betray the debilitating hermeneutical naïveté of contemporary conservatism. These are the people who, through no fault of their own, are largely ignorant of the nature and implications of the myriad of theological problems generated over the last three centuries of biblical scholarship.

On the other hand, critical scholars, many of whom still claim to believe in the God of the Bible, seem to exhibit a general blindness with regard to the ontological problems generated by their research. The bracketing of ontology in biblical theology and the

frequent tendency to avoid spelling out the ontological implications of critical research in an explicit and unequivocal manner represent a subtle albeit obvious form of repression. Liberals are constantly engaged in ever more sophisticated strategies of evasion when it comes to dealing with the collapse of realism in biblical theism.

Given this scenario, reaction to the title of this thesis and its reconstruction of a “case against realism” might be quite diverse.



The four basic personality types

On the one hand, there might be conservative scholars who will surely wonder what kind of person would have the audacity and presumption to ask whether Yahweh exists and dare occupy himself with trying to prove that He does not. Surely, such a person cannot be a *real* Christian. What *true* believer would want to do such a thing? Can one imagine any of the biblical authors or role models reconstructing arguments for atheism? Can anyone who has experienced the reality of God, the salvation of Christ and the witness of the Holy Spirit waste time on such nonsense?

Some critical scholars, on the other hand, might not know whether to laugh or cry at such an enterprise. After all, philosophy cannot "prove" the existence or non-existence of God. Besides, the Old Testament is not the type of literature to be mixed with philosophical thinking. Anyone who bothers with arguing about the ontological status of Yahweh has probably misunderstood the nature of religious language and has not yet reached his or her "second naiveté".

Then there might be the more radical scholars who would consider any exercise in ontological philosophy mixed with biblical criticism as being utterly futile. Of course, "Yahweh" does not really exist. He is, ontologically speaking, not any different from any other ancient deity or textually constructed entity. The hermeneutical assumptions of post-modern literary theory indeed take it for granted that the god of the Old Testament is technically a character of fiction, as are all people in books. Theology does not need the Bible and an attempted marriage between biblical literature and philosophy of religion is surely indicative of flawed hermeneutical assumptions. Besides, it is so obvious that Yahweh does not really exist that one need not waste time on proving the point.

Such and other similar possible reactions to this study are perfectly understandable. Of course, people do not just bother with reconstructing arguments against the existence of Yahweh within the context of Old Testament studies unless there is some story of their life that drove them to do so. Moreover, anyone attempting to mix philosophy of religion with the essentially unphilosophical discourse of Old Testament Yahwism has a lot of explaining and justification to do. All this is true.

With regard to the issues of explanation and justification, these will be addressed in the section on methodology in the introductory chapter of this study. As regards my own personal motive for walking where not only angels but especially Old Testament scholars fear to tread – i.e. talking about the ontological status of Yahweh – this matter will also be thoroughly dealt with.

During the course of the last three centuries, not a few students of theology from conservative backgrounds have dabbled with biblical criticism expecting spiritual growth only to experience spiritual suicide. Many, initially quite happy with their

fundamentalist ideology and expecting to learn more about the inerrant and inspired “Word of God” encountered in the worlds inside, behind and outside the text a reality very different from what they had come to believe was the case.

Of course, cognitive dissonance is one of the nastier occupational hazards of being a deeply religious biblical scholar. Even so, few things in the life of the believer can be as psychologically traumatic as losing one’s faith. In order to understand the ideological background of this thesis, even if it ultimately damages my case, I feel the need to provide the reader with a psychological perspective on my own spiritual journey. Like many others, I have travelled a path that has brought me to a place where I never ever thought I would end up.

An autobiographical abstract can be found in **APPENDIX A** at the end of the thesis. It will be appreciated if the reader takes cognisance of what is written there so as to be able to understand the ultimate motive and intentions behind what is surely an unconventional and, in some respects, very unorthodox study. It should also assist in explaining why this thesis takes the form of a devil’s advocate argument. Contrary to what some readers may think, this study is not intended as a downright deliberate attempt on the part of its author to promote a personal atheistic agenda.

Notwithstanding what might be erroneously deduced regarding my own attitude towards the devil’s advocate’s acerbic atheism, I genuinely hope and pray that someone might take up the challenge to refute its case against realism. As of yet, I have no idea whether this is possible and, in fact, fear that there might be no way back. Whatever the case may be, the abstract from *the diary of a “died-again” Christian* in **APPENDIX A** should explain the ideological concerns underlying the author’s comprehensive albeit imperfect articulation of an immensely complex problematic.

In **APPENDIX B**, the well-known social psychologist Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance will be discussed for its possible relevance to the anticipated reception of the case against realism. There can be little doubt that the devil’s advocate’s arguments will be rejected by many on other grounds than the purely rational, simply to alleviate the cognitive dissonance experienced in reading through

the seven arguments against the existence of Yahweh. The theory of Festinger, though not infallible, might be heuristically functional in providing an interesting perspective on why the case against realism will not be popular among scholars who are in favour of realism in Old Testament theology.

APPENDIX B concludes with a delineation of the diagnostic profile of someone unfortunate enough to suffer from the dreaded "died-again" Christian syndrome. For too long, students and scholars experiencing a crisis of belief have had to suffer in silence and it is high time that the whole ugly matter is brought out into the open. It can be a very, very lonely world if one has to face the ordeal of losing one's faith by oneself. The sheer amount of psycho-pathological stress one has to endure cannot be repressed indefinitely without paying a very heavy price as far as mental health is concerned.

In **APPENDIX C**, I shall attempt to locate the present thesis within a larger interpretative methodological context. Whatever the reader's response what is written in this thesis, it is hoped that the research might contribute in some way to the establishment of what I would like to call a "philosophical-critical" approach to the text. I personally believe that there is ample room for an independent approach within Old Testament scholarship where the issues on the agenda of the discipline known as the philosophy of religion can be addressed as they pertain to the discourse of Old Testament Yahwism. In this third and final appendix (supplementing the section on methodology in the first chapter), proposals will be forthcoming for the initiation of "philosophical-critical analysis" and what I would like to call "the quest for a philosophical Yahweh".

Both a new exegetical methodology (philosophical criticism) and philosophical-critical analysis on a larger scale (philosophy of Old Testament religion) will be pioneered as the "tools of the trade" for those embarking on this quest. Scholars impressed with the idea of a philosophico-religious approach to the discourse of Old Testament Yahwism are invited to take up the challenge and join the quest for a philosophical Yahweh.

On a lighter note, I should also probably say something about the cartoons and the

quotes to be encountered throughout the thesis.

All **CARTOONS** are from the comic strip known as *The Far Side* (cf. Bibliography). Sketched by cartoonist *Gary Larson*, these mono-frame funnies always cracked me up during those times when I failed to find the humour in anything else and when I was already cracked up in another sense of the word. Both the cartoons and the quotes have been inserted to make the reading of the thesis a less daunting, boring and all-too-serious undertaking.

I wanted to communicate something of the tragic comedy out of which this study was born. Of course, those readers who understand and can identify with the experience(s) articulated in **APPENDIX A** and with the arguments of the devil's advocate's case against realism should be capable of finding more than just comic relief. There is indeed a deeper allegorical meaning and a darker, somewhat melancholic and bitterer type of humour latent in these cartoons in their present context.



Testing whether laughter *is* the best medicine

As a disclaimer I would just like to add that, in using these illustrations, I never meant to insult or mock anyone but myself. Nothing personal or offensive is directed against any scholar taken to task by the devil's advocate in the thesis.

All the **QUOTATIONS** from biblical and post-biblical texts at the beginning of each chapter (beneath the heading) have roughly the same purpose as the pictures. These passages have deliberately been taken out of their original context to express a short albeit meaningful thought in some or other way related to the theme of this study and the unpleasant religious experiences of its author.

To those (almost) innocent readers (e.g. fellow students) who accidentally or on purpose happen to get their hands on this thesis, I also apologise profusely for any crisis of belief anyone might experience on account of reading the document. To be sure, any genuine effort to take cognisance of what the devil's advocate is trying to say may well be likened to an attempt at playing hop-scotch in a minefield. You will never know which hop (argument) will be the one that blows you (and your faith) to smithereens. Moreover, if you do manage to make it through alive, you may very well be scarred for life, even if only on a subconscious level. Anyone with religious beliefs who reads the devil's advocate's case and is not shocked by it has not understood it. To anyone who is reading the present section and who still has an untroubled conservative Christian faith and subscribes to the belief in biblical inerrancy, I would say only this: For the sake of sanity, please stop reading right NOW!

Finally, I wish to express genuine condolence to everyone for whom it may be compulsory to read through this lengthy document (I am, of course, referring to those people often politely referred to as eternal examiners). I hope that you, whoever you happen to be, will find the study interesting, captivating and stimulating enough to make up for the toil of reading through it all. All I can say in consolation is to assure you that the only thing more arduous than having to read through 500 pages of complex theological and ontological analysis is the hassle of having to *write* it. In the end, if worse comes to worse, should any of you not feel up to the daunting task of reading the monster, kindly consider the unorthodox option of weighing the beast and assigning a mark accordingly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I fear something horrible, it happens;

What I was afraid of has come for me.

(Job 3:25)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following people who have all contributed in their own particular and appreciated manner to the successful completion of this study:

My parents, George and Ezette Gericke, whose love, support and care have made all 28 years of my life possible and meaningful. I love you both dearly and am thankful for having had the privilege of being the son of the two most wonderful human beings I have ever known.

Professor Dirk Human, my supervisor whose friendly manner and enthusiasm for whatever I hoped to accomplish never failed to inspire me. Thank you for always being there for me, for insightful discussions and for everything you have done to make my doctoral studies in Old Testament science a most pleasurable engagement. I shall always cherish fond memories of our times together.

Professor Jurie Le Roux, co-supervisor of this thesis, whose profound awareness of the mystery and complexity of existence and whose sceptical and critical perspective on everything under the sun has taught me the wonderful truth that we humans are not as dumb as we think. Rather, we are infinitely more so.

Mrs. Edna Aucamp and her son Iwan, whose generous assistance in dealing with all the hassles resulting from trying to work on a computer with a mind of its own has saved me from losing whatever little sanity I still have left...I think.

Last and least, myself. Self, thank you for...well....um....let's see...ah, yes. Please turn the page to find out what I have to say to YOU.



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
AJP	<i>Australasian Journal of Philosophy</i>
APQ	<i>American Philosophical Quarterly</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BHS	<i>Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	<i>Beihefte zur ZAW</i>
CJP	<i>Canadian Journal of Philosophy</i>
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i>
ET	<i>Explorations in Theology</i>
HSM	<i>Harvard Semitic Monographs</i>
HSS	<i>Harvard Semitic Studies</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	<i>International Critical Commentary</i>
IDB	<i>International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IJPR	<i>International Journal for Philosophy of Religion</i>
IPQ	<i>International Philosophical Quarterly</i>
IRS	<i>Issues in Religious Studies</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JP	<i>Journal of Philosophy</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament - Supplements</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LXX	<i>Septuagint</i>
MT	<i>Masoretic Text</i>
OBT	<i>Overtures to Biblical Theology</i>
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	<i>Old Testament Library</i>

PQ	<i>The Philosophical Quarterly</i>
PR	<i>The Philosophical Review</i>
PS	<i>Philosophical Studies</i>
PT	<i>Philosophy Today</i>
SamP	<i>Samaritan Pentateuch</i>
SBT	<i>Studies in Biblical Theology</i>
SP	<i>Syriac Peshitta</i>
T	<i>Targum</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum – Supplements</i>
WBC	<i>World Biblical Commentary</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This study contains vocabulary about which there may be questions and/or misunderstanding. Certain seemingly familiar concepts and other neologisms are present and ambiguity may exist with regard to the denotative or connotative references of these words. All readers are advised to browse through this glossary to avoid unnecessary confusion in this regard.

Anti-realism - In this study, the view that the Old Testament and Old Testament theology are concerned with entities and scenarios that are purely fictitious. It includes the belief that both the scenarios and the characters *as they are depicted* in the Old Testament texts do not have and never had any corresponding extra-textual counterparts.

Atheism - 1. In most cases, the explicit or implicit view that the character Yahweh-as-depicted in the Old Testament texts is a character of fiction who has no extra-textual counterpart and therefore does not exist.

..... - 2. The view that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition does not exist.

..... - 3. In some contexts, the view that no God whatsoever exists.

Conservative - The ideological contingency prevalent among Old Testament scholars claiming that the Old Testament is a theologically unified body of texts and in all respects inerrant with regard to matters of science and history. The discourse of these scholars is often characterised by alleged theological realism, dogmatic eisegesis and apologetics for a conservative evangelical view of the nature of the text. The term “conservative” is utilised in this study in a way that is synonymous with what Barr (1981,1984) calls "fundamentalism".

Critical - 1. Another ideological contingency among Old Testament scholars. Here the adopted ontological viewpoint can be designated as being semi-realist. Though these scholars do not believe that the Old Testament texts are inerrant in matters of history, science and theology they also refrain from considering it to be altogether

fictitious. For them, the truth in the text concerns its function as metaphorical and symbolical religious discourse about allegedly amythological and ineffable transcendental reality.

..... - 2. An approach to the text that takes nothing for granted and attempts to read the text on its own terms rather than through the filters of dogma pertaining to what should be the case.

Deconstruction - In this study, the term seldom refers to the kind of approach to texts as popularised by the post-modernist philosopher Jacques Derrida. For the most part, it simply means, as was originally the case, the taking apart or coming apart of something that was constructed and used to be whole before structural weaknesses were exposed.

Devil's advocate - A literary construct and instrument of informal logic that will be the “implied author” of the case against realism in this study. This character is not to be equated with the real author who has adopted the guise to articulate what would otherwise be too out-of-character and psychologically painful to express. A formal and official definition of this literary and rhetorical technique will be provided in the section articulating the hypothesis of this study.

Exist - A state of being that is independent of the worlds of text and imagination. In other words, not existence in the weak sense of the word so as to include entities that are only subsistent in the worlds of rhetoric and mind. The choice for this qualification has little to do with a presupposed modernist (positivist / empiricist) ontological ideology that may or may not be operative in the discourse. Rather, the implied binary opposition between what is real and what is not has been utilised for the purpose of avoiding the kind of misunderstanding that can often result when ontological discourse contains elements of ambiguity and doubletalk.

Fiction - In the context of this study, this concept is used with reference to a type of discourse in which the scenarios described in the texts never actually happened as they are depicted. The specific characterisation of entities in the text also has no exact extra-textual counterpart and both the scenarios and the characters “exist” only in the

world of the text and in the imaginations of its readers.

God - In most cases, not any supposed divine reality per se but rather, the deity as depicted in popular Judaeo-Christian philosophical theology. In other words, the particular concept is mostly used to denote the so-called God of the philosophers (of religion) rather than so-called God of the Bible (Yahweh-as-depicted in the text). Even so, it is assumed that in Judaeo-Christian theology, the entity God is believed to be synonymous with the deity Yahweh.

Ideology - This polyvalent concept has no pejorative meaning in this study but merely denotes a particular culturally relative and socially constructed worldview.

Liberal - Cf. the definition of the term “critical”. In this thesis, these two designations are often used interchangeably unless otherwise specified or further qualified.

Macro-level analysis - That type of Old Testament interpretation that concerns itself with the Old Testament as a whole. It is to be distinguished from micro-level analysis. Examples of macro-level analysis include Old Testament theology, history of Old Testament religion and, in this study, philosophy of Old Testament religion. The philosophical-critical format of this study also features a macro-analytical perspective since it deals with the Old Testament as a whole rather than being limited to a particular section, book or passage of the Old Testament.

Micro-level analysis - A type of Old Testament interpretation that deals with the understanding of certain elements featured in selected pericopes and sections of the texts of the individual books in the Old Testament. It is to be distinguished from macro-level analysis. Examples of microanalysis include all forms of biblical criticism e.g. historical criticism, narrative criticism, social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, form-criticism, redaction-criticism and, in the context of this study, philosophical criticism.

Mythology - In correspondence with the variety of connotations and denotations this concept exhibits in contemporary discourse, when employed in this study, the word “mythology” (“myth” / ”mythical”) may refer to several different phenomena.

Depending on context, mythology may denote fantasy or fiction, a literary genre, a symbolic representation, a lie, an ideology, a superstitious and mistaken view of reality, or even the discipline of “theology”. Despite this variety, contextual appropriation should reveal what particular denotation or connotation is assumed to be operative in the discourse.

Old Testament theology - 1. The academic discipline of biblical theology.

..... - 2. The Old Testament’s depictions of Yahweh.

Ontological analysis - In the context of this study, a designation for the particular approach in the philosophy of religion that concerns itself with the ontological status of particular phenomena.

Ontological status - The state of being or the manner in which a specific entity is related to the real world as opposed to the worlds of text and imagination

Philosophical-critical analysis - A new approach to the reading of Old Testament text pioneered in this thesis. The specific designation is an umbrella term under which both “philosophical criticism” and “philosophy of Old Testament religion” are subsumed. It can be seen as being analogous to concepts such as "historical-critical analysis" or "literary-critical analysis” under which various types of related methodologies also feature. The distinguishing characteristic of philosophical-critical analysis is that the auxiliary discipline utilised in this case is the philosophy of religion (and not philosophy per se or any other branch of philosophical methodology). The term philosophical-critical analysis does not denote a specific form of micro-level or macro-level analysis per se. It is a collective designation for both types of inquiry aimed at reading the text from the perspective of one or more of the issues on the agenda of the philosophy of religion.

Philosophical criticism - A newly proposed form of biblical criticism to be understood as being on par with other interpretative methodologies like tradition criticism, narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, social-scientific criticism, etc. In this micro-level variety of "philosophical-critical" analysis, specific texts or sections

thereof are exegetically analysed to abstract the relevant data that the particular discourse might contain for inquiries related to one or more of the issues on the agenda of the philosophy of religion.

Philosophy of Old Testament religion - A form of enquiry *within* Old Testament studies rather than in philosophy of religion or philosophical theology. It is simply philosophy of religion where the religion analysed philosophically happens to be Old Testament Yahwism. It is to be distinguished from philosophical criticism. Whereas the latter is an exegetical methodology dealing with specific textual units, philosophy of Old Testament religion involves macro-level philosophical-critical analysis and therefore concerns itself with the Old Testament as a whole. In this regard, its scale and scope are similar to that of the history of Israel, Old Testament theology or the sociology of Israelite religion. Along with philosophical criticism, philosophy of Old Testament religion constitutes the second of the two types of philosophical-critical analysis.

Philosophy of religion - A subdiscipline of philosophy and sometimes of systematic theology or science of religion. It is concerned with philosophical questions pertaining to issues such as the nature of religion, religious language, the concept of revelation, the nature and existence of divine reality, the problem of evil, religious experience, the relation between religion and culture / history / morality / science and life after death. Though most philosophers of religion study the Judaeo-Christian tradition as encapsulated in the dogma of philosophical and systematic theology, the discourse of any religion is suitable for such analysis irrespective of whether or not it contains philosophical modes of expression.

Realism - In the context of this study, the view that the world of the text corresponds exactly to the past of the world outside the text. It is believed that the scenarios and characters depicted in the Old Testament text had exact extra-textual counterparts. Events occurred as described and the characters involved actually existed independent of the stories and imaginations of the authors and audiences of the texts.

Reality - That which exists. In the reconstruction of the case against realism, however, the concept of extra-textual reality does not always refer to reality as such,

whatever that may be. Rather, it denotes the way in which reality is perceived and mediated by the cultural and ideological constructs that contemporary Western culture accepts and takes for granted on the authority of certain paradigms in popular science.

Semi-realism - The view that, though the Old Testament texts contain errors and fiction with regard to matters of history, science and theology, one can still affirm that those texts communicate some sort of “religious truth”. Despite an admittance of the Bible’s fallibility, a realist belief in the actual existence of God is still considered to be justified given the supposed metaphorical nature of all religious language.

Text - Unless context dictates otherwise, when this study refers to “the text” it designates the reconstructed and translated texts of the thirty-nine books that constitute the Protestant Christian Old Testament Canon.

Yahweh - Unless otherwise qualified, the divine name refers to the character and deity who is depicted in the Old Testament texts. Asking whether Yahweh exists is therefore primarily concerned with ascertaining whether or not realism is justified with regard to this character's depiction in the Old Testament texts and therefore whether or not the textual representations of the deity have any extra-textual counterparts.