

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God!’”*

(Psalm 14:1; 53:1)

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND ACTUALITY

Does God exist? Is the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition a real, personal Being “out there” or is He merely a figment in the imagination of those who believe in Him? Is the God of biblically based forms of theism simply a character in a story or does He also exist in the extra-textual world? Is the God of the humanity’s largest religion ever really the “living” God or does He have an ontological status no different from that of all the other deities of ancient mythology who nobody really believes in any more?

The question concerning the existence of God has been neither irrelevant nor marginal in the theological and philosophical discourse of the relatively recent past. About four decades ago, theologian Schubert Ogden (1966:01) insisted that:

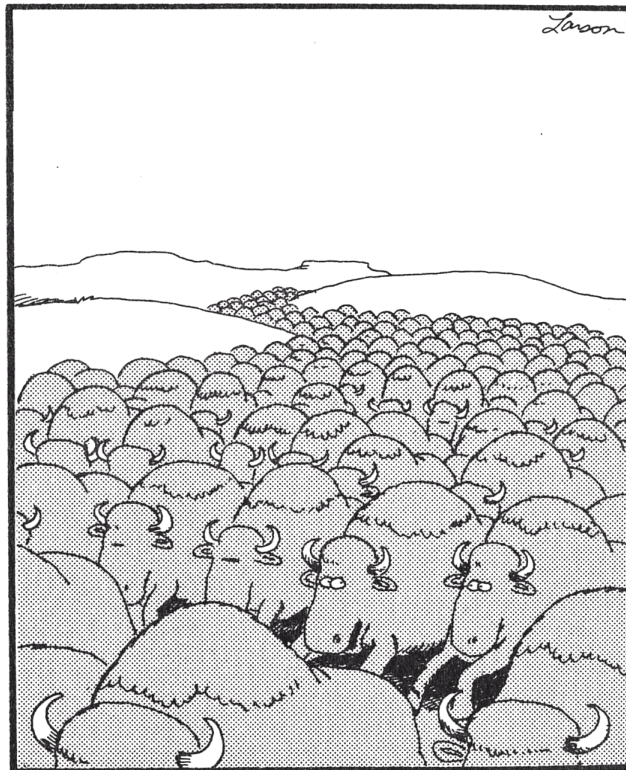
“...the reality of God has now become the central theological problem.”

In the years that followed, many other prominent theologians like Gordon Kaufmann (1972:02) and Hans Kung (1980:01) would reiterate Ogden’s claim. Then, as the last decade of the twentieth century dawned upon the world, quite a number of philosophers of religion joined the theologians in the belief that the question of God’s existence is as pressing as ever (cf. Hick 1993:01; Pailin 1993:01).

Of course, as Wilson (2000:01) observes, the “God-question” does not go away. No sooner have the intelligentsia of one generation confined the Almighty to the history books when popular opinion rises against them. This continues, despite what the

unbelievers may make of what appears to be a wholly irrational worldview. Ultimately, it has become clear that, whatever the truth regarding this controversial issue may be, every religious believer must, if honest, confront problems in relation to faith that were not necessarily present for earlier generations (cf. also James 1987:479; Armstrong 1993:02).

It is therefore to be expected that, at the dawn of the third millennium, many problematic issues pertaining to the existence of God have not been resolved to everyone's satisfaction. In fact, as Kolak (1994:11) points out, by the end of the twentieth century it has become doubtful whether consensus on such a personal, controversial, important and complex issue will ever be reached. Even after over two thousand years of mind-burning disputes, philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians still appear as addicted as ever to debating the pros and cons of realism in theistic metaphysics (cf. also Cupitt 2002:24-25).



**"As if we all knew where we're going."**

From the perspective of Old Testament scholarship, however, the actuality of the God question lies not merely in its perennial significance. What makes it particularly

relevant to the concerns of this study is the fact that, in the minds of most people, the deity in question – i.e. God – is supposed to be none other than Yahweh himself (cf. Carroll 1991:37; Fretheim 1984:02).

Since the biblical texts are generally considered to be the primary and foundational epistemological source for ascertaining the nature of the Judaeo-Christian God, the interrogative concerning the ontological status of the deity can be articulated in a very specific and qualified manner. Instead of speculating about the possible existence or non-existence of any divine reality per se, would it not be more useful to inquire about the validity of realism pertaining to the ontological status of the god Yahweh-as-depicted in the biblical texts?

There can be little doubt that, in mainstream orthodox Judaeo-Christian belief, the veracity of the biblical witness is presumed to constitute the fundamental epistemological ground for believing in the existence of God. In other words, should there be any reason to doubt the ontological claims and assumptions of the biblical texts, the credibility of any text-based dogma obviously becomes suspect as well. To be sure, the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text may well be indicative of the ontological status of any subsequent conception of “God” somehow rooted in, dependent on or derived from the biblical witness (cf. Harwood 1992:257).

## **1.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Does *Yahweh* exist? Is the god of the Old Testament only an entity within the world of the text and inside the imaginations of millions of people or is he also a real being in the real world outside the text? Was there ever an entity who actually said and did what the Old Testament texts depict the god Yahweh as doing? Alternatively, could it be that the biblical god is but another deity of ancient mythology with the same ontological status as other gods such as Marduk, Re, El, or Zeus? Stated differently, is realism in Old Testament theology justified?

In truth, there can be little doubt that most Old Testament scholars have already made up their minds with regard to this complex and controversial issue. Many, of course, will claim to be unwavering realists. A substantial number of Old Testament scholars

believe that Yahweh-as-depicted in the text is not just a character of fiction and that he does have an extra-textual counterpart (cf. Archer 1992:02; Kaiser et al. 1996:01). Allegedly, the god Yahweh is not simply a literary construct and should be equated with an actual extra-textual divinity who exists independent of the realms of text and imagination (cf. Clines 1995:38).

Others, irrespective of whether they would consider themselves to be theists or atheists, may be convinced that certainty on this issue is impossible and that no one can *prove* the case either way (cf. Davies 1995:21). Then, of course, there are those scholars who explicitly assert that realism concerning the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text is immensely problematic if not absurd.

Thus, according to Robert Carroll (1997:38):

“The biblical God is a character in Hebrew narrative and therefore is, in a very real sense, a figure of fiction.”

David Clines (1995:190) would agree:

“Let us next recognise that the God in the Pentateuch is a character in a novel. God in the Pentateuch is not a ‘person’; he is a character in a book. And there are no people in books, no real people, only fictions; for books are made, not procreated.... For if we were to imagine that the God of whom it speaks is identical to the ‘true God’ – the God who is worshipped and theologised about, we might have some serious theological problems on our hands...”

So would Walter Brueggemann (1997:33):

“Thus even with reference to God, the imaginative generative power of rhetoric offers to the hearer of this text a God who is not otherwise known or available or even - dare one say - not otherwise ‘there’.”

Moreover, according to Thomas Thompson (1998:304):

“It is not a good idea to believe in a god when he is a character in story! Don’t think for a moment that the narrator...or his audience ever believed in...that kind

of god. This is the world that the teller has created for his representation of Old Israel...”

David Gunn (1990:61) also believes that:

“To claim that God-as-character in the Bible is not the creature of the author/narrator is, in my view, perverse. For the reader for whom this narrative is Scripture, the question then is, what is the relation between God-as-character and the God of faith?”

Even Dale Patrick (1998:96), otherwise known to go so far as to argue for “the reality of the biblical God” (cf. Patrick 1982:212ff), can also be found taking up the strain.

“Can God be regarded as a speaker of genuine performative utterances? One could grant that the original participants believed that they were encountering this being and that ‘Israel’ is constituted by the sole recognition of YHWH as its God and sovereign, yet question whether there was/is a ‘real being’ with whom to transact. *Israelite identity may well be based on a fiction* (italics mine)”

Examples of concurring statements could be multiplied indefinitely. Doing so, however, would be plethoric. No more proof is needed to show that, as far as these scholars are concerned – whatever God or gods there may be – the god Yahweh-as-depicted in the Old Testament texts has no extra-textual counterpart. Euphemisms and jargon aside, the bottom line appears to be that the god Yahweh does not really exist at all.

Whatever one happens to believe with regard to the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text, it is somewhat surprising that *Old Testament scholars in general do not appear to be interested in arguing and justifying their viewpoints* on this contentious issue. In fact, it would seem that Old Testament scholars can debate just about every conceivable topic pertaining to Old Testament religion *except* whether or not Yahweh actually exists.

Despite the seemingly obvious relevance of the question pertaining to the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text, there is at present no bulk of scholarly

research pertaining to it. There is no discipline in Old Testament studies that allows its practitioners to be concerned with determining whether or not Yahweh actually exists. Who has ever heard of an article, a book, a monograph or a thesis entirely devoted to constructing arguments for or against the existence of Yahweh? Who has encountered a type of philosophy of religion where the religion in question is neither Judaism nor Christianity but Old Testament Yahwism?

Of course, some scholars would claim that the virtual absence of ontological analysis in Old Testament studies is hermeneutically and heuristically justified:

1. Most interpreters, if they do touch on the issue of Yahweh's ontological status, limit themselves to noting ever so casually that nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find formal ontological arguments. There is no attempt on the part of its authors to prove that Yahweh really exists – the deity's reality is simply and always taken for granted (cf. Chestnut 1968:09; Mettinger 1988:xi). Given that the ontological status of Yahweh is supposedly never disputed in the texts, Old Testament scholars do not consider it necessary or valid to bother with the question of whether or not Yahweh actually exists (cf. also. Von Rad 1980:108-127; Patrick 1982:212-238).
2. As Barr (1999:38) pointed out, the absence of philosophical rhetoric in the Old Testament seems to be the motivation behind the lack of interest in philosophical questions generated by the reading of Old Testament texts. The fact that the Old Testament God-talk is itself not systematic and philosophical but pluralist, diverse, incoherent and in literary mode is not exactly a catalyst in encouraging an alteration in the anti-philosophical tendencies currently prevalent in Old Testament theology (cf. Carroll 1991:44). Consequently, some Old Testament theologians would even consider the question regarding whether or not Yahweh actually exists as being hermeneutically illegitimate and even indicative of theological naïveté (cf. Davies 1995:21; Brueggemann 1997:70).
3. Constructing arguments for or against the existence of a deity is the speciality of the discipline known as the philosophy of religion. As a result, Old Testament scholars may consider themselves justified to bracket ontological questions, which

they might suggest are (fortunately?/unfortunately?) none of their business (cf. Cupitt 1989:44). They might insist that philosophers of religion and not biblical scholars should be concerned with detailed attempts at analysing and justifying ontological viewpoints. Old Testament scholars are by profession more interested in linguistic, historical, literary and sociological issues pertaining to the discourse of the Old Testament texts (cf. Barr 1999:56).

4. Personal theological and philosophical convictions may play a role in the bracketing of the question whether or not Yahweh exists. Apart from the fact that most scholars may consider the question to be naïve or the answer in response to it as being obvious, other individual differences may be noted. Some conservatives might consider the question as being improper or even blasphemous and profane. Others might think of any attempt to answer it as an exercise in futility and based on outdated epistemological and metaphysical assumptions. Attempting to do so might cause one to be stigmatised as a positivist, a rationalist, a modernist, etc. – all of which, we should know, are Very Bad.

It is on grounds such as these that many Old Testament scholars might wish to justify being professionally (as opposed to privately) unconcerned with the question of whether or not Yahweh actually exists. Upon closer scrutiny, however, all of these possible objections to Old Testament scholars bothering with the ontological status of Yahweh as depicted in the text may well be invalid. As will be argued in the section on methodology to follow, such objections are based on a number of untenable fallacies and should not go unchallenged.

In sum then: against the grain, the primary focus of this thesis will be a concern with the neglected ontological dimensions of Old Testament theology. Throughout the rest of this study, the reader will encounter nothing less than an immensely controversial attempt to provide a comprehensive, reasoned, text-based, philosophically orientated, in-depth, unequivocal, clear and unambiguous systematic answer to the question – *does Yahweh exist?*

### 1.3 HYPOTHESIS

In response to the almost unheard-of research question pertaining to the ontological status of the deity Yahweh-as-depicted in the Old Testament texts, the following *devil's advocate's* hypothesis was formulated:

*Yahweh-as-depicted in the texts of the Old Testament does not exist. The deity is demonstrably a character of fiction with no extra-textual counterpart. Consequently, realism becomes problematic not only in Old Testament theology but also in every form of theism that is in any way derived from, dependent on, rooted in or related to the discourse of the Old Testament texts.*

In the words of Warburton (1996:42-43), the “devil’s advocate” is someone who puts the strongest possible case against a position for the sake of argument rather than because of real disagreement with the position. *The devil’s advocate intends to test its own beliefs to the limit* through the presentation of a case against those beliefs it cherishes (or wants to cherish; or once cherished) most sincerely. According to Warburton (1996:43), people who play the devil’s advocate are sometimes accused of hypocrisy. This happens when they either appear to make a case for what they do not sincerely endorse or if it seems as though they are already thoroughly convinced that the belief they are attacking is false. However, this accusation of hypocrisy misses the point and perhaps stems in part from the negative associations with the word “devil” in the title at the expense of the connotations of the word “advocate”.

The point of utilising this rhetorical strategy is to get people to give good reasons in support of conclusions to which the devil’s advocate may well be favourably disposed. The devil’s advocate's scepticism and antagonism are therefore not to be confused with what may seem like a personal hostility to the beliefs it attacks. Rather, the apparently ruthless attempts to refute a particular viewpoint should be seen as simply no more than a necessary part of the role-playing involved in the utilisation of this rhetorical strategy. The entire rhetorical enterprise of this study is merely indicative of a temporary front being put up in the perpetual quest for the truth.



In order to avoid any possible misunderstanding regarding the author's ultimate motive for utilising this rhetorical strategy, the reader is kindly requested to take cognisance of what is written in **APPENDIX A** at the end of this study. Therein appears additional illuminating information pertaining to the author's own spiritual journey and theological/ideological context. An awareness of what is written in that autobiographical abstract will explain why both the hypothesis of this study and the forthcoming Old Testament perspective on the justification of atheism were considered to be part and parcel of the devil's advocate's compulsory repertoire.

#### 1.4 OBJECTIVE

In this study, the devil's advocate has a singular objective and that is to *prove* (sic) that Yahweh-as-depicted in the texts of the Old Testament does *not* exist. This aim can also be articulated in a variety of complimentary ways:

- To utilise the format and methodology of the philosophy of religion in order to deal with the problem of realism in Old Testament theology;
- To supplement historical-, literary-, and ideological-critical perspectives on the problem of realism with a comprehensive and almost exhaustive “philosophical-critical” view on the same issue (on which, see below);
- To pioneer philosophical-critical analysis (philosophical criticism / philosophy of Old Testament religion, cf. below) as a novel yet functional interpretative approach to be utilised in the reading of Old Testament texts;
- To spell out in detail why realism with regard to the ontological status of Yahweh should be considered as being immensely problematic;
- To explain in-depth why scholars may be justified in their claim that Yahweh-as-depicted in the text is a character of fiction with no extra-textual counterpart;
- To provide a justification of atheism from the perspective of Old Testament

studies;

- To show how a critical reading of the Old Testament has contributed to the religio-cultural phenomenon known as the “death of God”;
- To justify the claim that, if Yahweh does not exist, neither does “God”.

## 1.5 METHODOLOGY

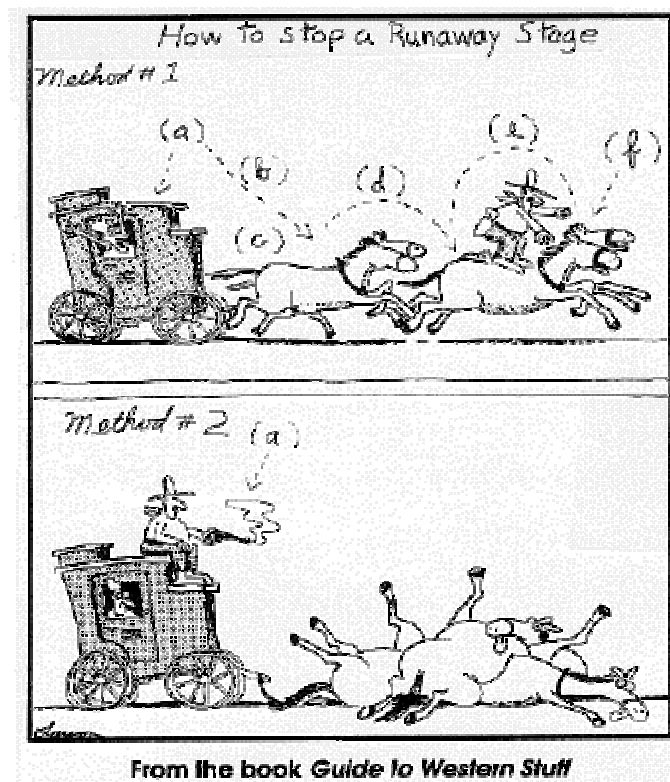
As was noted in the articulation of the research problem, there are several reasons why Old Testament scholars consider themselves justified in not bothering to argue for or against the existence of Yahweh. Consequently, it should hardly come as a surprise that in contemporary Old Testament scholarship, there is no independent and officially recognised interpretative methodology in which philosophy of religion is utilised as the primary auxiliary discipline.

No hermeneutical matrix currently operative in Old Testament interpretation, whether historical-critical, literary-critical or theological, seem to be particularly keen on dealing with ontological questions. To be sure, most approaches seem to make every effort to *bracket* or *suppress* the ontological issues generated by their particular perspectives on the biblical texts. As a result, it is beyond the scope of most heuristic domains to encourage as part of its repertoire the construction of arguments for or against the existence of Yahweh as philosophers of religion would argue for or against the existence of God. Given this state of affairs, the devil’s advocate has decided to pioneer a new approach *within* Old Testament studies. If neither Old Testament theology nor the many types of biblical criticism have room for ontological analysis, then the need arises for the creation of yet another interpretative methodology. This seems to be a compulsory and necessary preliminary matter that must be dealt with before *the case against realism* can be constructed.

The concern of the present study with the philosophy of religion – where the religion in question is neither Judaism nor Christianity but *Old Testament Yahwism* – is rather unheard-of. The construction of arguments for or against the existence of Yahweh is

presently not a recognised part of either philosophy of religion or Old Testament scholarship. It might therefore be apt to provide a prolegomena to the case against realism in which an attempt is made to locate the interpretative approach utilised in the present study within a hermeneutically legitimate and heuristically functional methodological context.

Of course, any attempt to pioneer such an approach should take cognisance of the reservations with regard to its viability as noted earlier in the articulation of the research problem. After all, the novel approach envisaged will involve utilising philosophy of religion as an auxiliary discipline *within* biblical studies. Such an alternative approach must, on the one hand, allow the Old Testament specialist to deal with the kind of issues that philosophers of religion concern themselves with as these may be generated by the reading of the biblical texts. On the other hand, the particular type of analysis should not be based on hermeneutically illegitimate and methodologically flawed foundations. The pre-philosophical, pre-scientific, pluralist and religious nature of the text's religious discourse should definitely be reckoned with.



The pioneering of such a “philosophical-critical” approach is aimed at filling the gap in Old Testament studies where, at least since the time of Gabler, there has been little “official” room for dealing with philosophical questions generated in textual interpretation. After philosophy as handmaid to Old Testament theology was allegedly replaced by history (and, in contemporary times, sociology and literary criticism), the formative role and perennial relevance of philosophy in both the modernist and post-modernist period have been greatly repressed.

It may be a truism that the practice of constructing metaphysical systems from Old Testament discourse, as is the wont of pre-critical and conservative approaches to the text, fell into disrepute after the rise of critical historical consciousness. Nevertheless, contrary to popular belief, philosophy never lost its influence in Old Testament studies to the extent that some scholars of the history of interpretation would have us believe.

The history of the primary auxiliary disciplines acting as handmaids in Old Testament interpretation is not as simplistic as the popular developmentalist stereotype of philosophy > history > literary criticism/sociology might suggest (contra Brueggemann 1997:6-56). What few of those endorsing this hermeneutical evolution realise is the fact that it was developments in *philosophy* that made it possible for the (modernist) historical and the (post-modernist) literary/sociological approaches to come into vogue in the first place! (cf. Le Roux 1993:32)

This state of affairs has led to the idiosyncratic scenario that philosophy in general, and *philosophy of religion* in particular, have not featured significantly in interdisciplinary research within Old Testament scholarship. Inquiring about the types of interdisciplinary research currently operative within Old Testament scholarship, one will encounter just about everything *except a philosophical approach* to Old Testament Yahwism:

- Though vast amounts of scholarly research in Old Testament studies focus on matters derived from the history of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion and whatnot, not much will be found that have some bearing on *the philosophy of religion*.

- Apparently there is ample room in Old Testament scholarship for historical-critical analysis, sociological-critical analysis, etc. But who has ever heard of “*philosophical-critical analysis*”?
- Old Testament scholars consider it important to do research on the history of Old Testament religion, the sociology of Old Testament religion, etc. Yet few, if any, seem to be concerned with “*the philosophy of Old Testament religion*”.
- The extended family of biblical criticism includes historical criticism, sociological criticism, literary criticism, psychological criticism, etc. Surprisingly, however, nobody seems to be interested in adding an approach one might call “*philosophical criticism*”.

In other words, very few scholars have bothered to utilise *philosophy of religion* in the same way they have made use of the history or sociology of religion. To be sure, for some or other reason, Old Testament scholars, on those rare occasions when they do utilise philosophy, often seem to be interested in anything but the *philosophy of religion*. Prima facie, the relevance of *philosophy of religion* for the study of *religious* texts seems obvious. Nevertheless, philosophically minded interpreters of the Old Testament appear not to be as interested in this branch of philosophy as they are in, for example, philosophy of science, hermeneutics, philosophy of history, epistemology, logic, ethics, etc. Moreover, the utilisation of philosophy usually only occurs in the context of higher-order hermeneutical discussions and meta-criticism, and not as part of a first (or second) order interpretative approach to the text.

Of course, there always *appear* to be exceptions to the rule. A few scholars seemed to have made an effort to concern themselves with one or more of the issues that feature on the agenda of the philosophy of religion (on which, see below). Especially in Old Testament theology, a substantial amount of research exists pertaining to seemingly philosophico-religious issues such as the nature of the Old Testament’s religious language, the concept of revelation, the problem of evil, the nature of God, the nature of religious experience in Yahwism, the relation between Old Testament religion and history, etc.

Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that for the most part the concern was never really philosophical but wholly *theological*. For this reason, any possible insistence that a philosophical approach to Old Testament would be superfluous since Old Testament theology already deals with most of the issues on philosophy of religion's agenda implies a failure to appreciate the differences between the perspectives, interests and domain assumptions of the two subjects.

Even if Old Testament theologians had dealt with some of the issues on the agenda of the philosophy of religion in a way that is indistinguishable from that of the philosophers themselves, this does not render a philosophical approach to Old Testament religion any less functional. Philosophy of (Christian) religion is still an officially recognised subject despite the presence of overlapping concerns with systematic theology, philosophical theology and science of religion. In a similar manner, a philosophy of (Old Testament) religion would not be irrelevant even if such an approach to the biblical texts exhibited some overlapping concerns with issues on the agenda of Old Testament theology. To be sure, the currently popular tendency among Old Testament theology's practitioners to bracket ontology may in itself justify the establishment of a specialised philosophical approach to the text to rectify the negligence.

The devil's advocate, therefore, begs to differ from Davies (1995:21) who claims that biblical scholarship is not competent when it comes to drawing conclusions with regard to the implications of research for the existence of Yahweh.

First of all, even non-philosophical methodologies such as historical- and literary-critical methodologies are generally considered to be competent for determining the ontological status of characters like Adam, Noah, Abraham and Jacob. Critical historical scholarship is believed to have demonstrated on various grounds that these people, at least as they are depicted in the Old Testament texts, may well be characters of fiction. As depicted, they never really existed and realism regarding their ontological status seems unfounded.

If this is true, what prevents even such non-philosophical approaches from spelling out the implications of their findings about the relation between text and reality for the

ontological status of the character of Yahweh-as-depicted in those texts? If Adam, Noah and Abraham never existed, does this not imply that – whatever God there may be – the god Yahweh depicted as interacting with these fictitious characters shares their ontological status? If Noah, for example, never existed, how can the character Yahweh depicted as speaking and dealing with Noah be considered to have an extra-textual counterpart?

Secondly, even if historical- and literary-critical approaches intend to bracket the ontological implications of their findings or refuse to argue their claims philosophically, what prevents Old Testament scholarship from making room for a philosophical approach to the text that can and should concern itself with, amongst other things, ontological issues? What *a priori* justification could possibly be forthcoming so as to rule out the possibility and viability of an approach to the text that analyses the bearing its discourse might have on one or more of the issues on the agenda of the *philosophy of religion*? And if this is possible, what would prevent scholars from attempting to determine the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text?

After having argued that the case for biblical scholarship as being ontologically incompetent and that the view of Old Testament theology as being an *ersatz* substitute for a philosophical-critical approach to the text are flawed, the four possible objections anticipated earlier in the articulation of the research problem can now be refuted. All these arguments seemingly justifying the negligence on the part of Old Testament specialists to utilise the *philosophy of religion* as an auxiliary discipline and to assess the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the texts are demonstrably invalid:

1. It would be a fallacy to argue that just because the Old Testament assumes the reality and existence of Yahweh and never attempts to argue its case that Old Testament scholars may not get involved in such a form of inquiry. So the Old Testament does not contain an attempt to prove that Yahweh exists – so what? Neither does the Old Testament seek to prove the existence of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Daniel, and other characters. Yet this fact is not considered to render the inquiries of historians with regard to the ontological status of these

figures to be *ipso facto* illegitimate. If scholars are allowed to debate the issue whether or not any of these characters ever existed, why can the same questions not be put concerning the ontological status of the character Yahweh-as-depicted in the text?

2. The problem with leaving philosophical questions regarding the existence of Yahweh for the philosophers of religion is that these scholars do not limit their inquiries to the Old Testament discourse. The “religion” most philosophers of religion are interested in is not Old Testament Yahwism. Instead, the majority of philosophers and philosophical theologians are concerned with the religion of post-biblical Judaism or Christianity. When these scholars argue for or against the existence of God, their epistemological sources for constructing a conception of the deity are not limited to the Old Testament. Instead, in their ontological analyses they base their claims on the systematic and normative discourse of post-biblical doctrinal theology.

Consequently, one cannot expect philosophers of religion to limit their ontological analysis to whether or not realism is justified with regard to Yahweh-as-depicted in the text. These scholars are concerned with the God of the philosophers and not merely with the God of the Old Testament. A sole concern with the latter is probably a luxury that only Old Testament specialists can afford. Moreover, it makes sense that all issues related to the *Old Testament* texts should be dealt with by those whose field of expertise is the *Old Testament* – even if the issues in question are of the philosophico-religious variety. Unless *Old Testament* scholars deal with the issue of whether or not Yahweh-as-depicted in the text actually exists, nobody is going to bother about this particular problematic.

In fact, any suggestion that Old Testament scholarship should bracket philosophical issues altogether seems to amount to deplorably inconsistent reasoning. Do Old Testament scholars leave historical, sociological or literary analysis of Old Testament texts to historians, sociologists or literary critics? Surely not. Instead, interdisciplinary interpretative methodologies such as historical-, sociological- and literary-critical methods are created in order to allow the Old Testament specialists to perform their own readings of the Old Testament



texts via the issues on the agendas of those disciplines. By analogy, Old Testament scholars need not leave matters pertaining to the issues on the agenda of the *philosophy of religion* that were generated in the reading of Old Testament texts to philosophers or theologians proper.

Even if some historians and sociologists should decide to do research on Old Testament religion, this would not make a historical or sociological approach within Old Testament scholarship *ipso facto* illegitimate. By analogy, even if philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians someday decided to study Old Testament Yahwism, this would not render a philosophical approach within Old Testament studies itself superfluous. Philosophy of (Christian) religion, after all, is a subject on the agenda of more than one academic discipline. It is taught not only in departments of philosophy but also in systematic theology, philosophical theology and science of religion. Theoretically then, there would still be room for a philosophy of (Old Testament) religion even if some philosophers of religion or philosophical theologians happened to take an interest Old Testament Yahwism.

3. Any critique of the utilisation of the philosophy of religion as an auxiliary discipline within Old Testament studies based on observations of the literary and unsystematic nature of the Old Testament discourse is similarly misplaced. On the one hand, engaging in philosophy of religion does not require the source material to be in the format of coherent systematic metaphysical statements before ontological analysis can commence. If the religious discourse is literary and pluralist this is simply something to take cognisance of and does not prevent philosophical analysis from taking place.

On the other hand, it would also be a misconception to believe that the philosophy of religion always aims at constructing unified and coherent systems of normative metaphysical thought. This is, in fact, not the case. Such a view may stem from stereotyping the discipline or subscribing dogmatically to one particular school of thought within it (i.e. Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy). It may also be the result of equivocation in the sense of confusing philosophy of religion with systematic or philosophical theology. To be sure, philosophy of religion is able to

adapt its agenda to the specific nature of the religious discourse of the religion that it analyses.

In other words, there need not be any danger of illegitimately roping the Old Testament in the service of constructing orthodox, unified and credible systems of thought. The concept of a “philosophy of Old Testament religion” is therefore not to be understood in the sense of referring to ancient Israel’s supposed philosophical thought. The genitive is subjective and not objective. The “philosophy” in question is not that of the Old Testament itself. The wording merely denotes a *philosophical perspective on the Old Testament’s religious discourse* and not, as before the rise of historical criticism, a *philosophical system derived from it*.

Just because the Old Testament does not itself feature a philosophy of religion does not render such a perspective on the texts illegitimate and superfluous. To justify this claim one need only to consider the way in which disciplines such as the history of religion or the sociology of religion have been utilised in an auxiliary fashion by Old Testament scholars. Such utilisation is not considered to be invalid merely because the Old Testament is not a textbook of history or sociology. Simply because the Old Testament came into being long before the rise of modern historiography and sociology does not make the utilisation of such disciplines in auxiliary fashion illegitimate. In short, the pre-critical nature of the Old Testament therefore in no way undermines the possibility of utilising the history and sociology of religion in an auxiliary capacity within Old Testament scholarship.

By way of analogy, the same is true with regard to the philosophy of religion despite the fact that the Old Testament does not itself contain an explicit and systematically articulated expression of this form of inquiry. Such a state of affairs does not mean that the utilisation of the philosophy of religion within Old Testament scholarship is *ipso facto* hermeneutically illegitimate. Though it is correct to say that the Old Testament is in a sense pre-philosophical and even unphilosophical it is equally true that analysing the religious discourse of the texts via non-philosophical approaches generates philosophical questions. Since already

extant interpretative methodologies continue to bracket the philosophico-religious questions they generate, the need for an independent approach to the text that utilises the philosophy of religion as auxiliary discipline becomes all the more obvious.

4. Finally, if some scholars for personal reasons consider asking philosophical questions improper, illegitimate or a waste of time, that is their good right. They are entitled to their opinions whatever these may be. However, mere personal distaste or a lack of interest in a particular approach to the text does not imply that such an approach is not possible. After all, many scholars do not like or even consider hermeneutically valid some of the already extant mainstream approaches to the text (e.g. historical criticism, literary criticism, social-scientific criticism, etc.). To be sure, one can point to many shortcomings and problematic assumptions present in all available interpretative approaches to the text.

Be that as it may, few scholars would argue that just because they themselves are not interested in certain approaches to the text and because of the way some people abuse them this would imply that such methodologies are inherently sinful, dysfunctional or illegitimate. In the same vein, if some scholars consider philosophy of religion to be boring, irrelevant or too controversial they can rest assured that no one will force them to make a living out of it. But there is no need for hegemony in Old Testament scholarship where, theoretically, the number of possible ways in which one can approach the text seems infinite but where, in practice, any scholar interested in philosophy of religion is ridiculed and marginalized.

In sum then, if disciplines such as the history and sociology of Old Testament religion can be conceived of as being legitimate heuristic enterprises – despite the fact that the Old Testament is not a textbook for any of these subjects – the implications for the present controversy should be clear. It is difficult to fathom why exactly the suggestion of utilising the philosophy of religion in the form of independent and officially recognised interpretative methodologies needs to be considered as being hermeneutically illegitimate or heuristically dysfunctional.

With the hermeneutical justification for the utilisation of the philosophy of religion within Old Testament studies taken care of, it is now time to move on to more constructive matters. According to Pailin (1986:03) several issues of concern feature on the agenda in the philosophy of religion, e.g.:

1. The nature of religion
2. The nature of religious language
3. The concept of revelation
4. The nature of God
5. The existence of God
6. The problem of evil
7. Religious experience
8. The relation between religion and history
9. The relation between religion and science
10. The relation between religion and culture
11. The relation between religion and morality
12. Supernatural and parapsychological phenomena (miracles, telepathy, etc.)
13. Life after death
14. Etc.

It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss all the various topics in detail. Readers of this thesis who are not acquainted with the subject matter of the philosophy of religion are referred to the variety of viewpoints as articulated by any of the following introductory studies: Flew (1966); Mitchell (1971); Charlesworth (1972); Rowe (1978); Wainright (1978); Churchill & Jones (1979); Smart (1979); Swinburne (1977,1979); Cahn & Shatz (1982); Davies (1982); Kolakowski (1982); Nielsen (1982); Hick (1983); Abraham 1985; Pailin (1986); Hubbeling (1987); Geisler & Corduan (1988); Pojman (1988); Tilghman (1992); Kolak (1994) and Quinn & Taliaferro (1997) and Davies (2000).

In addition, the interested reader can also browse through academic journals (e.g. *APQ*; *AJP*; *CJ*; *IJPR*; *IP*; *JP*; *PQ*; *PR*; *PS*; *PT* [cf. “List of Abbreviations”]) to get a feel for the dynamic of the philosophical rhetorical enterprise.

Of the aforementioned issues on the agenda of philosophy of religion, it is no. 5 – the existence of God – that will constitute the particular issue of concern in this study. Moreover, whilst under this rubric philosophers of religion include both arguments for and against the existence of God, it is the latter domain of inquiry that will be encountered in the pages to follow.

This being said, however, concern for most of the other issues on the agenda (e.g. the nature of religious language, the nature of God, the problem of evil, the relation between religion and culture/history/science, etc.) will not be altogether absent from this study. Even though this thesis has as its primary focus the reconstruction of ontological arguments, given the scope of the problematic, either direct or indirect consideration of most of the other issues on the agenda will also feature in the case against realism (see below under “outline of contents”).

This state of affairs is unavoidable as one can hardly argue for or against the existence of a deity without some reference to the presumed nature of the particular religious language, the supposed nature of the deity, the relation between the particular religious discourse and history or science, etc. Still, these issues are of secondary importance and attention to them will be limited. Such concern will be directly proportionate to the possible bearing these secondary issues might have on the primary ontological issues forming the basis of the particular arguments against the existence of Yahweh.

Since the present study is done in the context of Old Testament science, there is an additional problematic that needs to be mentioned as far as methodology is concerned. As the initial concern of the thesis pertains to the ontological status of Yahweh as depicted in the text and not (initially) to that of God as depicted in Christian philosophical theology, the popular atheist arguments against the existence of God cannot be reproduced to argue the hypothesis. Any attempted recourse to atheist arguments against the existence of God already articulated in the philosophy of (Christian) religion may well be either irrelevant or invalid in the context of Old Testament Yahwism.

Most contemporary atheist arguments that are based on the views of people like Hegel, Comte, Hume, Kant, Holbach, Feuerbach, Darwin, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Ayer, Russell, Camus, Sartre, and others are mainly constructed with the God of the post-biblical Christian philosophical theology in mind. As such, these atheist arguments are not always directly applicable to the context of Old Testament God-talk. If one were to argue against the existence of Yahweh by uncritically adopting any one of the arguments against the existence of God, whilst simultaneously failing to compensate via adaptation for the possible differences between the profiles of the two deities, the entire case against realism might well be invalid.

In many instances, the various popular atheist arguments against the existence of the Judaeo-Christian God (e.g. the argument from evil; logical problems with omnipotence and omniscience, etc.) would, in the context of some of the Old Testament's depictions of Yahweh, not even apply. Left unmodified and utilised in the context of Old Testament Yahwism, such arguments are based on "pseudo-problems" with little basis in the discourse about Yahweh in the Old Testament texts.

Of course, it may be useful to take cognisance of the atheist arguments articulated by e.g. Sartre (1948); Madden (1968); Springfield (1968); Phillips (1970); Monod (1972); Angeles (1976,1980); Cupitt (1980); Dawkins (1978,1986,1995); Smith (1979); Gauvin (1981); Mackie (1982); Nielsen (1985); Kurtz (1986); Russell (1986:55-72); Barker (1987, 1993:41-62); Steiner (1989); Martin (1990); Stein (1980,1985,1987,1990); Sagan (1997:22-27); etc.

However, since the profile of the deity that these arguments presume to deconstruct is often at odds with that of Yahweh as depicted in the text, they cannot be of primary relevance in the present context. For example, the problem of evil may indeed constitute an argument against realism pertaining to the ontological status of certain conceptions of "God". However, this popular atheist argument cannot be used to argue against the existence of Yahweh if the Old Testament texts sometimes explicitly acknowledge Yahweh's causative role in the actualisation of natural and moral evil. Neither can the illogical nature of certain conceptions of omnipotence and omniscience be used to argue against the existence of Yahweh if the deity is not

always depicted as being all-powerful and all-knowing.

In other words, the devil's advocate's arguments against the existence of Yahweh must be constructed with reference to the particular depictions of Yahweh in the Old Testament texts rather than presupposing a conception of the deity as defined by Christian philosophical theology. Moreover, the devil's advocate must reckon with the fact that the Old Testament texts are not systematic, coherent and philosophical but pluralist, diverse and exhibit prosaic and poetic as opposed to propositional discourse.

In order to facilitate a hermeneutically legitimate and heuristically functional context for attempting the reconstruction of arguments against the existence of Yahweh, the following methodological innovations have been pioneered:

- 1 With reference to the context of Old Testament interpretative methodologies, the approach adopted in this thesis may be designated as **“philosophical-critical analysis”**.
- 2 **“Philosophical-critical analysis”** can be defined as that type of interpretative approach to the text that concerns itself with those problems generated in the reading of the Old Testament texts that relate to the issues on the agenda of the philosophy of religion. The latter discipline is utilised in an auxiliary fashion analogous to the ways in which Old Testament scholars already utilise other disciplines such as the history and sociology of religion.
- 3 The concept of **“philosophical-critical analysis”** is an “umbrella” term:
  - 3.1 On the level of exegesis (micro-analysis), philosophical-critical analysis operates in the form of “philosophical criticism”. **“Philosophical criticism”** may be defined as that form of biblical criticism where individual texts are read from the perspective of what relevance they might have for one or more of the issues on the agenda of the philosophy of religion.
  - 3.2 On a larger scale, philosophical-critical analysis features in the format of a “philosophy of Old Testament religion”. **“Philosophy of Old Testament**

**religion**” involves a form of macro-analysis on the same scale as Old Testament theology, i.e. where the Old Testament in its entirety is under consideration. In this case, the concern is what the discourse of that collection of religious texts as a whole (and despite its incoherent and diverse nature) might yield with regard to its possible bearing on and relevance for any of the issues on the agenda of the philosophy of religion.

Since this study is concerned with the ontological issues regarding the depiction of Yahweh in the Old Testament *as a whole*, the type of philosophical-critical analysis that will be encountered in the chapters to follow can be classified as macro-analysis. In other words, the case against realism can be seen as an example of a “philosophy of Old Testament religion”. Because of its broad scope and the fact that the concerns are not limited to a single passage in the text, the case against realism as a whole cannot be classified as philosophical criticism (i.e. micro-analysis). The latter form of biblical criticism will, however, not be wholly absent from the thesis as there are many individual texts that will be read from a philosophical-critical perspective. Yet even here the micro-analysis will feature only as a preliminary step on the way to macro-analysis.

In sum then, a “philosophical-critical” approach to the particular problematic that will be of concern in this thesis should be adequate in order to facilitate an attempt to deal with the question whether or not Yahweh exists in a manner that is hermeneutically legitimate, methodologically contextualised and heuristically functional. Moreover, a philosophical-critical approach to the problematic should be able to do justice to the complexity and comprehensiveness of the ontological issues so often bracketed in other approaches but which will provide the focal point of the present research.

Given this hermeneutic and heuristic background regarding the type of interpretative methodology selected for the justification of the hypothesis, the following method or process was actualised in an attempt to meet the stated objective:

1. **The discourse of the entire Old Testament** was scrutinised from a philosophical-critical perspective for elements that make realism with regard to the ontological status of Yahweh problematic.



2. **The discourse of Old Testament scholarship** was assessed for perspectives on the texts that might have atheist ontological implications.
3. The relevant data from both sources were then **abstracted, sorted** and finally **reconstructed** in the form of a variety of systematic arguments against the existence of Yahweh.

The end result of this methodology is, as the title of this study suggests, a philosophical-critical perspective on the case against realism in Old Testament theology.

## 1.6 OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

Philosophers of religion who attempt to argue for or against the existence of God utilise a variety of different arguments to prove their case. Those arguing that God exists have come forward with ontological arguments, arguments from design, cosmological arguments, arguments from religious experience, arguments from teleology, existential arguments, arguments from revelation, etc. In turn, those denying that God exists have replied with arguments from psychology, arguments from sociology, the argument from evil, the argument from logical positivism, and a host of inversions of the popular theistic arguments e.g. the argument from bad design, etc. (cf. Pailin 1986:126-141).

As noted earlier, this study is not an example of the philosophy of *Christian* religion but rather an attempt to engage in a philosophy of *Old Testament* religion. Consequently, the arguments featured in the case against realism in Old Testament theology cannot be watered down copies of the arguments utilised in the philosophy of Christian religion. Instead, the devil's advocate's arguments must be based on categories and topics more directly related to the nature and contents of the biblical discourse and that of Old Testament studies.

The attempt to argue the case against realism in Old Testament theology will be based on seven arguments specifically tailored to deal with the ontological problems generated by the variety of biblical-critical readings of Old Testament texts. The

devil's advocate's arguments against the existence of Yahweh are the following:

1. The argument from theological pluralism
2. The argument from unorthodox theology
3. The argument from polymorphic projection
4. The argument from mythology and syncretism
5. The argument from fictitious cosmography
6. The argument from fictitious history
7. The argument from meta-textual history

Each of the chapters to follow will feature one of the aforementioned arguments. For practical purposes, the contents of these chapters will all be constituted along the following lines:

1. The chapter begins with an introduction to the particular argument to be reconstructed.
2. The introduction is followed by the main section in each chapter involving a comprehensive and systematic presentation of the issues that make realism pertaining to the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text problematic.
3. Finally, each chapter concludes with a summary of the perceived anti-realist ontological implications of the particular problematic and a reminder of the particular argument's location and function in relation to all the other arguments and, therefore, of the cumulative nature of the case against realism.

A cursive overview of the contents of each chapter can be ascertained from the following description:

- In **Chapter 2, the argument from intra-textual theological pluralism** in the Old Testament will be reconstructed from a philosophical-critical perspective. First of all, it will be demonstrated that there exist within the Old Testament's depiction of Yahweh serious and irreconcilable contradictions regarding the nature and attributes of Yahweh; the acts of Yahweh in history and the morality the deity

considers normative. Secondly, diachronic perspectives from both tradition and source criticism will also reveal serious ontological dilemmas for realism. Given the reality of mutually exclusive representations of Yahweh in the Old Testament texts, the implication appears to be that, if Yahweh does exist at all, at least some of the depictions have no extra-textual counterparts. This means that realism based on a supposed "Old Testament view" of Yahweh is impossible. There is no one coherent Old Testament view of Yahweh. All we have is a host of mutually exclusive ideologies relating to each other in deconstructive fashion.

- In **Chapter 3, the argument from unorthodox theology** is presented. Here the focus will be on how realism in the Old Testament's depictions of Yahweh is apparently deconstructed by orthodox Christian philosophical theology. The argument of this chapter is that, if there is only one God and this God conforms to the profile constructed by stereotypical Christian philosophical theology, Yahweh as depicted in the text must be a character of fiction. As long as the real God is conceived of as being eternal, single, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and omnibenevolent, the deity Yahweh who is often depicted as not exhibiting any of these attributes obviously has no extra-textual counterpart. The bottom line is that, if "God" exists, Yahweh doesn't.
- The third argument against the existence of Yahweh – **the argument from polymorphic projection** – will be discussed in **Chapter 4**. With the same basic format as the previous chapters, this chapter intends to demonstrate why the presence of anthropomorphism, sociomorphism and psychomorphism in the discourse depicting Yahweh is immensely problematic for realism in Old Testament theology. It will be argued that the main dilemma is not, as some scholars suggest, that it was merely a case of Israel's views of the world, history and morality being imperfect and limited. Rather, the essence of the dilemma for realism in biblical theism is shown to be the fact that the god Yahweh himself subscribes to a world-view demonstrably based on all-too-human projection. By demonstrating that the deity's own relation to and beliefs about the world, the events of history and normative morality never transcend the culturally and historically relative superstitions of his speechwriters, it is possible to expose the

deity Yahweh as a creation of humans, rather than vice-versa.

- **Chapter 5** features a reconstruction of **the argument from mythology and syncretism**. Here the ontological implications of embarrassing elements in the Old Testament texts such as parallels with other ancient mythologies, ample evidence of syncretism, the belief in magic and traces of superstition will be spelled out. It will be argued that the presence of these elements in Old Testament God-talk makes realism in Old Testament theology problematic as it suggests that the ontological status of the deity is demonstrably not much different from any other god featured in ancient Near Eastern mythology.
- **Chapter 6 – the argument from fictitious cosmography** – deals with the ontological implications of the fictitious elements in Old Testament cosmology. It will be demonstrated that there are numerous locations in the world in the text with no counterparts in extra-textual reality. The problem, once again, concerns not merely the fact of Israel's primitive conceptions of the world but the embarrassing truth that the god Yahweh himself shared its erroneous beliefs and that his alleged revelation and acts even presuppose the empirical veracity of such conceptions. The main concern of the chapter, however, deals with the question of Yahweh's supposed whereabouts in actual reality. As Yahweh is often depicted as literally dwelling "up there" in the skies and this is demonstrably not the case in the world outside the text, realism regarding the ontological status of the deity can actually be falsified by empirical means.
- In **Chapter 7** the focus will be on what may be called **the argument from fictitious history**. This argument against the existence of Yahweh can be seen as consisting, on the one hand, of various sub-arguments demonstrating why it has become problematic to believe that the scenarios depicted in the biblical narratives actually happened as depicted. On the other hand, an attempt is made to explain why the presence of fiction in the texts depicting the acts of Yahweh leads to the radical albeit often repressed conclusion that Yahweh-as-depicted in the text is himself a character of fiction with no extra-textual counterpart. Since the nature of the texts allows one to demonstrate that the god Yahweh never really appeared,

spoke and acted in the ways depicted, it follows that no sufficient grounds remain to justify realism regarding the ontological status of the deity.

- **Chapter 8** discusses the seventh and last argument against the existence of Yahweh in the case against realism: **The argument from meta-textual history**. Here the analysis will be concerned with the philosophical dilemmas for realism as these are implicit in the critical reconstructions of the origin, nature and developments of both Yahwistic religion and the texts that later became the Old Testament. It will be argued that rather than Yahwism being *the* true religion and the Old Testament being the inerrant, infallible and inspired "Word of God", a combined historical and philosophical approach to the origin and development of both Yahwism and the Old Testament implies otherwise. The history of Old Testament interpretations may even be construed as a history of repressed anti-realism. Finally, the devil's advocate even goes so far as to suggest that both contemporary conservative and critical attempts to salvage realism are half-baked and hypocritical. All the anticipated possible objections to the devil's advocate's case against realism are demonstrably riddled with informal fallacies.
- In **Chapter 9**, the final chapter in this thesis, a summary will first be presented to recapitulate on the essence of what has been argued in the case against realism. This will be followed by an attempt to spell out what the devil's advocate believes to be the pan-atheist (sic) implications of the collapse of realism in Old Testament theology. It will be argued that when theology is no longer bracketed with the history and philosophy of religion, it becomes clear that the end of realism in Old Testament theology has a domino effect. It spells the end of realism in any form of theism in any way related to, dependent on or derived from the discourse of Old Testament Yahwism. The bottom line is that, if Yahweh as depicted in the text does not exist, neither does "God".

Though probably somewhat of an artificial distinction, it might be useful to take cognisance of the fact that, apart from the general ontological concern, the chapters of this study can be classified along the following lines of interest. Chapters 2-3 can be seen as being concerned with matters pertaining to *theology*, chapters 4-6 with what

some would call *mythology*, and chapters 7-8 with issues of *history*.

Alternatively, from the perspective of the philosophy of religion – though once again somewhat of an oversimplification – the themes on the subject’s agenda feature in the following manner in the thesis:

<b>TOPIC OF INQUIRY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION</b>	<b>LOCATION IN THE CASE AGAINST REALISM (CHAP. NO.)</b>
The nature of religion	4,5,8
The nature of religious language	2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9
The concept of revelation	2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9
The nature of divinity	2,3,4,8,9
<b>The existence of divinity</b>	<b>2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9</b>
The problem of evil	3,4,9
Religious experience	3,4,7,8
Religion and morality	2,3,5
Religion and history	2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Religion and science	4,5,6,7,8,9
Religion and culture	3,4,5,8
Parapsychology/supernatural	4,5,7,8
Life after death	2,4,6,8

Readers wading through the devil’s advocate’s case should therefore not be concerned if any additional arguments that they might consider to be potentially relevant to the aim of this study do not immediately feature where they expect it to. Nor should they consider it a hindrance if all popular objections to particular claims made at some points in the thesis are not immediately addressed.

In every chapter there will be found assertions and conclusions that might prompt the reader to think, “this is not necessarily so”. On many occasions, readers may very well consider the devil’s advocate to be presumptuous, naïve, outrageous, pedantic, positivistic or overzealous in presenting its case. It may be felt that the devil’s advocate did not take account of this or that theory, idea or development in Old

Testament studies, theology, philosophy or some other related discipline.

Be that as it may, it is of course not practically possible to furnish an exhaustive rebuttal of each and every conceivable objection that could possibly be made in reply to what the devil's advocate has to say. Some readers might very well come to the end of the thesis finding that certain possible objections were not explicitly taken cognisance of. If this happens to be the case, such readers should ask themselves whether or not some or other statement found in the arguments constituting the case against realism might not contain *implicit* clues as to how the devil's advocate would have responded.

Finally, it should be noted that since the case against realism constitutes *a cumulative argument* against the existence of Yahweh, the functionality of the details should ultimately be judged from the perspective of the whole. *Readers are therefore advised not to dismiss or write of the ideas presented by the devil's advocate prematurely or until they have taken cognisance of the case against realism in its entirety.*

## 1.7 ASSUMPTION

One of the first issues that needs to be addressed concerns the assumption implicit in the devil's advocate's hypothesis and consequently underlying its proposed methodology. I am, of course, referring here to the question of whether it is really possible to "prove" the ontological status of a deity one way or another. In light of the fact that over two millennia of philosophers could not prove or disprove the existence of divine reality to everybody's satisfaction, the present attempt to do so might seem quite presumptuous.

To be sure, many readers will no doubt find the devil advocate's approach to the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the texts simply smacking of rationalism, positivism and modernism in general. In the present academic cultural milieu, which some would call post-modernist, anything remotely associated with these epistemological approaches is not exactly popular. There can be no doubt that the devil's advocate's use of words such as "exist" and "prove" will leave many theologically and philosophically sophisticated people exasperated.

Readers sharing the opinions of the so-called analytical approaches to the philosophy of religion (based on the ideas of Wittgenstein and the paradigm shift supposedly initiated after the linguistic turn in the philosophy of language) will no doubt consider all the ontological judgements of the devil's advocate as being methodologically improper. The analytical school denies that it is the task of the philosopher of religion to pronounce judgement on whether a certain belief system is true or false and whether or not it corresponds with what is otherwise believed about reality. According to this view, everything should be left as it is and merely clarified. No ontological critique is allowed.

In this regard, the devil's advocate would like to concur, at least in a Popperian sense, on the impossibility of constructing a positive proof *in favour of realism*. To do so would require a certain amount of clarity, definition and verification that is just not possible this side of heaven. However, according to the devil's advocate, whilst proving that Yahweh does exist may be problematic, proving that he does *not* (i.e. via a Popperian form of falsification) may not to be as difficult as might *prima facie* appear to be the case.

As an Old Testament specialist, the devil's advocate does not need to comb every nook and cranny of the universe before it can justify its atheist conclusions. All that is required in the present context, according to the devil's advocate, is to prove that the depiction of Yahweh in certain Old Testament texts is demonstrably fictitious. Once this has been done, the collapse of realism regarding such parts of the Old Testament discourse soon leads to the deconstruction of realism with regard to all the other texts somehow dependent on or inter-textually related to it. Moreover, once it has been determined that Yahweh-as-depicted in the text does not exist, it follows that realism is also unjustified in any form of theism in any way rooted in, related to or derived from the Old Testament God-talk.

Whether or not one agrees with this perspective on such a controversial issue, the reader should not be too quick to dismiss the assumption of the devil's advocate regarding the alleged possibility of proving that Yahweh (a.k.a. God) does not exist. Neither should one be too quick to write it off simply by stigmatising it as positivist, rationalist, theologically naïve, satanic, nihilist, impossible, invalid or whatever else.



In fact, the devil's advocate is convinced that, by the time the reader has managed to read through its entire case – hopefully with an open mind – present reservations, confusion or disagreements concerning the possibility of proving that Yahweh does not exist may very well no longer be such a contentious issue.

Of course, it is not expected that there will be universal agreement as regards to the success of the attempted proof that Yahweh (and therefore God) does not exist. Nevertheless, only by reading what the devil's advocate has to say can the reader be sure whether the scepticism about the possibility of proving that Yahweh/God does not exist was, in fact, justified or, alternatively, presumptuous.

## **1.8 NOVELTY**

As noted earlier, problems with realism in Old Testament theology are hardly novel. Hitherto, many studies exist that, from perspectives of critical history, sociology, literary criticism, ideological criticism and comparative religion have attempted to demonstrate that realism in Old Testament theology is problematic.

Thus one finds that many historical and sociological approaches seem to have little room for divine causation and supernatural intervention in their narration of the history and sociology of Israel. Narrative critics speak of Yahweh as a character of fiction whilst ideological critics often appear to consider the deity to be a mythological projection and an objectification of particular individuals' and communities' will-to-power. Even reading between the lines of many an Old Testament text, it seems obvious that the particular scholar believes that the god Yahweh as depicted in many an Old Testament text only exists in the worlds of text and imagination.

The novelty of the present approach, therefore, lies not so much in the specific problematic it deals with, i.e. with the collapse of realism. Rather, what distinguishes this study from previous deconstructions of realism with regard to the ontological status of Yahweh is the particular way in which it attempts to spell out, via the philosophy of religion, exactly why such anti-realism may be justified. Its novelty lies in the way in which it articulates the same age-old issues from a “philosophical-

critical” perspective and the fact that the reconstruction of arguments against the existence of Yahweh is the sole concern of the entire study.

It might very well be the case that the devil’s advocate’s arguments have been implicit within the discourse of critical scholarship all along. However, the heuristic objectives of the non-philosophical methodologies that have generated them ensured that the implications of the findings of critical scholarship with regard to the ontological status of Yahweh were seldom made explicit. By utilising the format of the ontological arguments in the philosophy of religion, this study refuses to bracket ontology and intends to spell out clearly and explicitly the possible anti-realist ontological implications of earlier research. In this sense then, through abstraction and reconstruction via philosophical-critical analysis, the thesis provides an *alternative* and, in that sense, novel perspective on why realism is problematic in Old Testament theology.

## **THE CASE AGAINST REALISM**

### **ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE EXISTENCE OF YAHWEH**

