

The Quest for a Philosophical YHWH (Part 3): Towards a Philosophy of Old Testament Religion

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‘Most work in biblical theology has tended to ignore philosophy and to depict philosophical work as a rival or enemy.’

James Barr (1999:155)

ABSTRACT

This is the third and final article in the series designated ‘The Quest for a Philosophical YHWH’. Whereas the first paper introduced the proposal of utilising philosophy of religion in Old Testament studies and the second paper discussed ‘philosophical criticism’ as a new type of biblical criticism, this paper is concerned with the pioneering of a higher-order discipline called ‘philosophy of Old Testament religion’. This approach differs from the exegetical task outlined in the previous discussion in that the scope of philosophical analysis is extended to involve the religious beliefs, concepts and practices of the Old Testament as a totality.

A INTRODUCTION

In *Biblical Studies* there exists a variety of larger-scale disciplines concerned with studying the Old Testament *as a whole*. Some examples include Old Testament theology, the history of Israelite religion, the sociology of Israelite religion, Old Testament ethics, Old Testament hermeneutics, and so on. Curiously, however, there is currently no higher-order discipline exclusively concerned with *philosophical* reflection on the religious beliefs, concepts and practices of the Old Testament as a whole – i.e., there is no *philosophy* of Old Testament religion. This does not mean biblical scholars avoid philosophy altogether. To be sure, recourse to philosophical disciplines like hermeneutics, philosophy of science, philosophy of history, philosophy of language, and post-modern philosophies of culture are not uncommon (cf. Oeming 1985; Müller 1985; Barr 1999:146-171). In addition, many biblical scholars approach the texts in dialogue with prominent philosophers or philosophical schools of thought. Nevertheless, there is no independent higher-order discipline in Old

Testament scholarship exclusively concerned with doing philosophy of religion with reference to Old Testament perspectives on ancient Israelite religion as a totality. Given the plethora of interdisciplinary approaches already created in biblical scholarship, this is a rather odd state of affairs. For, if we remember that the biblical texts are first and foremost *religious* discourse, then it would seem obvious that if any *philosophical* discipline might be of relevance to the study of ancient Israelite *religion* then surely it would be a philosophical discipline with *religion* as its primary concern, i.e. *philosophy of religion* (Gericke 2003:3).

To be sure, it is not the case that biblical scholars have not discussed some of the issues which philosophers of religion concern themselves with. For example, Old Testament theologians have written on, *inter alia*, the nature of biblical religious language, the conceptions of revelation in ancient Israel, the attributes of YHWH, the problem of evil and theodicy, the relationship between religion and history, the problem of religious pluralism, the justification of religious experience in the prophets, etc. – all of which parallel some of the loci on the agenda in philosophy of religion. Yet for the most part, such excursions have tended to involve biblical scholars approaching these issues from a *theological* rather than from a *philosophical* perspective (although the distinction here is not watertight, cf. Crenshaw 1983). Thus as was shown to be the case with reference to biblical criticism (see Part 2), so too in the study of ancient Israelite religion *as a whole* many burning philosophical questions have been left in oblivion (see Barr 1999:156).

But why should this be the case? Surely there must be some explanation – some good reason as to why biblical scholars are not utilizing philosophy of religion in the same way they make use of, e.g. history of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, etc. For how else does one explain the fact that in biblical scholarship the kind of questions philosophers of religion ask are dutifully bracketed, ignored, evaded, or dismissed as out of place? (Brueggemann 1997:71; Barr 1999:147; cf. however Gericke 2003; 2006c) In this regard – and with reference to philosophy in general – Barr (1999:137) argues that much of the hostility to the discipline was fostered by, *inter alia*, the separation of biblical and systematic theology (where philosophy is the main dialogue partner), anti-natural theology sentiment in Barthian dialectical theology (which implies *ipso facto* hostility to philosophy of religion in the context of biblical studies), the Biblical-Theology Movement's conception of a Semitic (vis-à-vis Greek, i.e. philosophical) mindset, and the 'end' of philosophy (especially metaphysics) in the post-modern era. These developments, along with a general dislike of (or unfamiliarity with) philosophical discussions on religion, (i.e., the foundations of their own beliefs, or lack thereof) have led some biblical scholars to imply that philosophy of religion and biblical studies don't mix ('Leave philosophy to the philosophers')

Is this the last word? Is it forbidden to challenge what seems to be a kind of unspoken consensus (if Barr is correct)? Of course not – science does not work like that and progresses only through innovation and new perspectives on old problems. However, not that one should strive for controversy for its own sake, but there is something awry with the whole philosophy-bashing's line of reasoning in favour of the view that Old Testament scholars may not and cannot engage in philosophy of religion.

First, it represents inconsistent reasoning, the adherence to which would lead to an absurd state of affairs if consistently applied. For then biblical scholars would have to leave historical questions for historians proper, linguistic issues for linguists, literary criticism for literary critics and theological problems for theologians proper. But if they do not do so (and need not do so), why should biblical scholars leave philosophical questions generated in their study of the biblical texts for philosophers? Certainly not because such questions are already addressed, for as biblical theology differs from systematic and philosophical theology, so too a philosophy of Old Testament religion will be different from Jewish or Christian philosophy of religion and therefore may exist as a discipline in its own right.

Second, the line of reasoning involves a fallacy of essentialism if one attempted to argue that a biblical scholar is by nature a linguist, a historian, a literary critic or a theologian, and not a philosopher of religion. This argument mistakes a purely contingent state of affairs for a necessary one – a sort of biblical scholar's inversion of the existentialist dictum evidenced in the idea that essence precedes existence. But there is no such thing as an essence when it comes to methodology in biblical scholarship and any argument to the contrary is simply methodological imperialism. The only fixed aspect or essence in biblical studies, if such a thing there be, lies not with methodology but with the biblical text being the object of analysis. For while biblical scholarship by definition studies the biblical texts, the possibilities for approaches to and perspectives on it are virtually infinite.

Third, it is a fallacy of non-sequitur to argue that since the Old Testament in its entirety is not philosophy and because its authors did not ask philosophical questions (and because the canon is not an answer to a philosophical problem), the biblical scholar should not attempt to analyze the religion of ancient Israel from a philosophical perspective. The conclusion simply does not follow from the premises. Again an analogy should suffice to elucidate the absurdity of such reasoning. Thus the fact that the Old Testament is not a textbook of history or theology has never prevented biblical scholars from asking questions from historical or theological perspectives. In a similar manner, the Old Testament need not be philosophy to be philosophically interesting – it need only give rise to philosophical questions. For though the texts do not contain philosophy in the technical sense the discourse does

witness to metaphysical, ontological, theological, moral, epistemological and other presuppositions, all of which give rise to interesting philosophical questions. And just because the biblical authors did not ask or answer such questions is no more reason to avoid them as it would be to avoid historical or theological questions for the exact same reason.

Fourth, another non-sequitur fallacy lies hidden in the argument that the literary-diverse and theologically-pluralist nature of the biblical texts in their entirety makes philosophical analysis inappropriate if not impossible. As will be argued later on, these characteristics of the biblical texts as a totality are *part* of their philosophical interest rather than an obstacle to philosophical analysis. The latter idea is itself a fallacy of presumption in that this objection to philosophical analysis assumes that a philosophy of Old Testament religion is either looking for philosophy *in* the Old Testament or trying to construct a philosophical system *from* its ideas (by attempting to harmonize the diverse ideas into a unified whole). But this is a misunderstanding of what is meant by the concept of 'philosophy of Old Testament religion.' For the new discipline involves nothing more than philosophical reflection *on* the religious beliefs and assumptions in the biblical texts. The word 'philosophy' in the phrase 'philosophy of Old Testament religion' does *not* refer to any supposed philosophical ideas attributed *to* the ancient Israelites themselves, to the ideas of a particular philosopher who have written on the Old Testament, to the Old Testament scholar's personal philosophy of religion, or to a biblically-based philosophy of religion for the present. None of these connotations are intended. Instead, it simply denotes a descriptive type of philosophical analysis of the religious discourse of the Old Testament for its own sake.

Fifth, if biblical scholars left philosophical questions pertaining to the Old Testament to philosophers of religion proper we still would not have anything like a philosophical study of ancient Israelite religion. Not only do philosophers of religion not limit their work to the Old Testament (a prerogative and luxury of biblical scholars), but they are also primarily interested in involving post-biblical Jewish or Christian philosophical theology so as to come up with a contemporary relevant systematic philosophy of religion. As argued in the previous rebuttal, this is *not* what a biblical scholar will be doing.

Of course, it is one thing for someone like the present author to argue that the use of philosophy of religion in the study of the religion of ancient Israel is justified, but it is quite another thing to explain what such a discipline will involve in practice. Even the discussion on philosophical criticism as a new type of exegesis in the previous paper (Part 2) was comparatively simple in relation to what is attempted here. For here we are concerned as it is not merely with a philosophical analysis of individual texts but with how one might go about doing philosophy of religion in one's study of the Old Testament *as a whole*. But how is this possible? For notwithstanding the above refutations,

many of the concerns and reservations biblical scholars have against the reading of the biblical texts in dialogue with philosophy are completely justified. It would certainly be a mistake to use philosophy as this was done before the advent of historical criticism. So what is a 'philosophy of Old Testament religion' supposed to be about anyway?

B WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY OF OLD TESTAMENT RELIGION?

1 A definition of philosophy of Old Testament religion

Philosophy of Old Testament religion is to be a higher-order discipline within Biblical Studies that concerns itself with philosophical reflection on the religion of ancient Israel as attested in the traditions of Old Testament Yahwism(s). Utilising philosophy of religion as primary auxiliary subject, this discipline operates on a large scale (analogous to Old Testament theology or history of Israelite religion) and studies the religious beliefs, concepts, and practices of the Old Testament in relation to issues on the agenda in philosophy of religion. Dealing with the Old Testament as a totality, philosophy of Old Testament religion is informed by the findings of philosophical-criticism (a new form of exegesis, see Part 2) and therefore represents the second of the two types of philosophical-critical analysis (see Part 1).

2 Objectives in philosophy of Old Testament religion

Philosophy of Old Testament religion has as its general objective the identification, reconstruction and discussion of the philosophical problems that can be derived from the study of ancient Israelite religion *qua* biblical Yahwism(s). Its goal is to deal with all philosophical puzzles that can be derived from the ontological, metaphysical, epistemological, theological, and moral assumptions implicit in the religious discourse of the Old Testament as a whole (cf. Gericke 2006d:1182). It therefore aims at being a highly specialised form of philosophy of religion where the religion in question is neither Judaism nor Christianity but Old Testament Yahwism(s) so as to allow Old Testament scholars to deal with those philosophical questions that lie outside the scope of historical, literary, sociological and theological inquiries. Moreover, unlike Jewish or Christian philosophy of religion proper the ultimate aim is neither mere dialogue with philosophers who have written with reference to the Bible nor to come up with a philosophy of religion for the present but simply a descriptive analysis of the philosophical problems derived from the study of ancient Israelite religion for its own sake.

3 Assumptions in a philosophy of Old Testament religion

The primary assumptions of the discipline of philosophy of Old Testament religion are the following:

1. The Old Testament in its totality is not philosophy and it is impossible to harmonise its diverse contents into one coherent normative philosophical system.
2. Even so, the Old Testament texts in their totality provide us with data concerning a variety of Yahwistic religious beliefs, concepts and practices.
4. Underlying these beliefs, concepts and practices is a host of ontological, metaphysical, moral, epistemological, and theological assumptions.
5. Through specialised inferential analysis involving the identification of what is presupposed by the biblical authors with regard to philosophically-interesting issues, these assumptions can be accessed, abstracted and reconstructed in logical (i.e., propositional) forms.
6. The contents of these propositions, all of which pertain to religion, cannot fail to give rise to philosophical problems of the type one encounters in *philosophy of religion*.
7. As these questions are generated in a technical analysis of biblical texts, such inquiries are the prerogative of biblical scholars.
8. Old Testament scholars who are interested and capable can utilise philosophy of religion as an auxiliary discipline to analyze and discuss these questions.
9. Since this is biblical scholarship and not philosophy of religion proper, the discussion of the philosophical problems is an end in itself and not a means for constructing a normative philosophical-theological system.

Of course, it is possible to identify assumptions behind these delineated assumptions of the discipline itself or infinitely reformulate and refine existing rhetoric, depending on perspective and point of entry. However, sooner or later a point of diminishing returns that leaves one with no alternative but to come up with a functional list of basic and helpful presuppositions which should suffice for present purposes. The assumptions listed above are therefore meant not as an exhaustive or perfect list of necessary presuppositions but is considered to provide a good overview of the general train of thought involved in the meta-philosophical justification of the discipline, thus making it apparent that cognisance was taken of recent hermeneutical debates and that a genuine effort was made to anticipate the most likely heuristic objections.

4 The nature of philosophy of Old Testament religion.

As implied in assumption 9 above, philosophy of Old Testament religion should not be confused with Christian or Jewish philosophy of religion, systematic theology, philosophical theology, natural theology, apologetics or polemics. It is also not to be understood as a variant of Old Testament

theology, ideology criticism, or the same as related philosophical disciplines like metaphysics proper or its counterparts in social sciences like *Religionswissenschaft*. But if philosophy of Old Testament religion does not approximate any of these things, then what is it like?

Well, as stated above, philosophy of Old Testament religion will be a discipline *within* Old Testament studies which utilises the methodology of philosophy of religion so as to reflect philosophically on the nature and contents of ancient Israelite religion as attested in the traditions of Old Testament Yahwism(s) in their diverse entirety. Yet the aim is not to harmonize the diversity (as in fundamentalism) or even simply to argue for the truth or falsity of any particular belief *per se* (as in mainstream Christian philosophy of religion) but instead simply involves phenomenological engagement with the metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, theological and other presuppositions implicit in the discourse and a descriptive analysis of the philosophical questions these presuppositions give rise to. This means that philosophy of Old Testament religion will be a critical discipline, and one not to be practiced in ignorance of the findings of all types of biblical criticism and all other large-scale approaches (e.g. biblical theology, history of Israelite religion). Thus the historical, social, literary, ideological, theological, psychological and all other matrices in which the contents of the texts originated and currently function are important and not to be bracketed. Many discussions in mainstream philosophy of religion have bracketed the history of religion and the pluralism in biblical theology and this is a mistake.

5 Issues of interest/subject matter in philosophy of Old Testament religion

The traditional agenda of mainstream analytical (as opposed to continental) philosophy of religion has with some justification been criticised in contemporary thought for being little more than a watered-down version of Christian apologetics (cf. Cupitt 2001; cf. Goodman 1999:31; Harris 2002:22). Be that as it may, such criticism, though valid in many respects need not be considered fatal to the possibility of a more descriptive philosophy of religion that biblical scholars can engage in. Any denial of this possibility will stem from a very narrow perspective on what philosophy of religion could be conceived of as, thinking it to be only either pseudo-apologetics or normative philosophical theology. But based on the various views of the relationship between philosophy and religion as delineated by Charlesworth (1972), there can be no *a priori* reasons as to why philosophy of religion cannot merely involve descriptive philosophical conceptual-analysis without the additional need to come up with a normative system of metaphysics for contemporary religious life. If this is the case then the basic and fundamental concerns reflected in the loci on the extended stereotypical agenda of mainstream philosophy of religion in general (and analytical philosophy of religion in

particular) are still relevant and legitimate, and should be open for re-contextualisation in the context of Old Testament studies (cf. Kolakowski 1982; Pailin 1986 *passim*). However, as will be suggested below, given the nature of the Old Testament's contents (it is not Christian systematic theology), there can be no question of adopting the agenda of analytical philosophy of religion *en bloc* and without modification. Nevertheless selective adoption combined with reconstructive adaptation of the agenda will provide us with the following tentative, hypothetical and suggestive list of topics, all of which if properly examined might be considered interesting and legitimate concerns for the philosopher of Old Testament religion:

1. The nature of Old Testament Yahwism(s).
2. The nature(s) of the Old Testament's religious language.
3. Revelation in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
4. The nature and attributes of deity in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
5. Arguments for and against the existence of YHWH and other gods
6. The problem of evil in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
7. Religious experience in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
8. The relation between religion and history in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
9. The relation between religion and morality in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
10. The relation between religion and culture in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
11. Religious epistemology in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
12. Religious phenomena in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
13. Religious concepts in the Old Testament.
14. Post-mortem existence in Old Testament Yahwism(s).
15. The intra- and inter-religious pluralism in the Old Testament, etc.

Note, of course, that many of these loci are familiar both in Old Testament theology and systematic/philosophical theology. However, as noted earlier, in Old Testament theology the philosophical perspective is absent while in systematic/philosophical theology the exclusively Old Testament perspective is lacking. Moreover, though these loci are typical, they do not as such represent anything like an exhaustive list. For the range of loci cannot be limited – anything and everything can be an object of philosophical reflection (e.g. even negligible textual details such as personal names with theophoric elements, the theological dynamics of a genealogical list, or the boring details of prescriptive discourse in cultic legal materials). This is also the belated realisation in contemporary mainstream philosophy of religion, that is, that not only the deity or religious language but also any detail in religious phenomena and practices

can in itself generate immensely interesting philosophical puzzles. In the words of Stump (2005:898):

Philosophy of religion is sometimes divided into philosophy of religion proper and philosophical theology. This reflects the unease of an earlier period in analytic philosophy when some philosophers of religion felt that philosophical reflection on religion was respectable if it confined itself to mere theism and abstracted from all particular religions – everything else was taken to be theology, not philosophy. *But most philosophers now feel free to examine philosophically any aspect of religion, including doctrines and practices peculiar to individual religions.* Not only are these doctrines and practices interesting in their own right... (emphasis mine).

Stump (2005:898) goes on to note that a consideration of previously unexamined phenomena in a particular religious tradition can, in turn, have the most unexpected implications for philosophical problems in other fields (e.g. discussions on the concept of ‘sanctification’ in Christian philosophy of religion have opened up new perspectives in the ‘free-will vs. determinism’ debate within mainstream metaphysics). Thus, in theory and practice, the philosopher of Old Testament religion can with a little creativity and philosophical sensitivity (not to mention Aristotelian wonder) become fascinated by just about any aspect or detail in the discourse of the Old Testament – for the limits of enquiry are but the limits of our own imagination. This means that our inability to find within the Old Testament philosophically-interesting topics is not reflective of any limits in the texts themselves but more likely due either to a failure of creativity or a lack of nerve. For the challenge is not to discover something new or hidden but instead to see what has been there before our eyes all along.

6 Philosophy of Judaeo-Christian religion vs. philosophy of Old Testament religion

Though philosophy of Old Testament religion will adopt much of its agenda from mainstream analytical (as opposed to continental) philosophy of religion, the loci listed above also represent an adaptation of the stereotypical Judaeo-Christian *capita selecta*. For looking at the issues of interest and the theories they generate within Christian philosophy of religion, the hermeneutically sensitive Old Testament scholar will have some serious reservations about what the proposals for the utilisation of that agenda would involve. After all, it would definitely be heuristically illegitimate to simply adopt the agenda of stereotypical Christian philosophy of religion *en bloc* since many of the traditional loci pertain to philosophical questions generated by the dogmas of post-biblical systematic and philosophical theology and were not derived from a critical philosophical analysis of the religious traditions of Old Testament Yahwism. Consider the following examples in this regard:

- *The nature of religious language* in the Old Testament is multifaceted. The popular assumption among many Old Testament scholars that all religious discourse in biblical god-talk is metaphorical is the result of an uncritical adoption of the theory of the supposed metaphorical nature of religious language constructed with reference to post-biblical Christian dogma by philosophers of the Christian religion. As such it cannot be taken for granted when analysing the biblical discourse but if utilised as a working hypothesis should first be tested to see if it really does justice to all of the details of the texts in their pre-critical and pre-philosophical historical and literary contexts. To be sure, the Old Testament's god-talk is often metaphorical, but the claim that it is always such borders on neo-allegorism and often represents little more than a sorry attempt to immunise the discourse against criticism or to alleviate the embarrassment of crude anthropomorphisms.
- In Christian philosophy of religion the Old Testament is considered to be a part of divine *revelation*. But within biblical studies, one cannot use that as a working hypothesis, for when the philosopher of Old Testament religion studies Old Testament Yahwism, the religion in question is no longer biblical Christianity but ancient Yahwism and this tradition in its early stages had nothing comparable to a canonical Old Testament it considered as being revelation. Instead, the texts speak of alien phenomena such as theophany, verbal communication and divine providence in socio-historical events. This state of affairs in turn implies that when one discusses the concept of revelation in ancient Israelite religion philosophically, the subject matter is slightly differently nuanced than in post-biblical Christian philosophy of religion.
- When one has to deal with *the nature and attributes of God* in Christian philosophy of religion, concepts such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, love, etcetera, have to be analysed philosophically. Within the context of Old Testament religion these concepts are sometimes out of place as Yahweh is often not depicted as being omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and wholly loving in the traditional stereotypical orthodox Christian sense. This also means that philosophical analysis of ancient Israelite religion will have to reckon with theological pluralism – that is, the fact that YHWH is indeed sometimes depicted as being omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good, etcetera, and on other occasions in ways contradicting the more philosophical-theological stereotype. In addition, there arises the need for the philosopher of Old Testament religion not only to ask what YHWH is like (as is the question in Old Testament theology), but also to ask much more fundamental questions, often completely ignored in Old Testament theology. That is, in this locus, the philosophical question is not simply concerned with 'what is YHWH like?' but also: 'what is a god?' (e.g., asking what, according to the Old Testament texts, justifies classifying an entity like YHWH as belonging to the class 'deity').

- *Arguments concerning the existence of God* such as the cosmological argument, the ontological argument, the argument from design, etcetera, are based on attempts to correlate a modern worldview with an orthodox concept of the Christian deity. In the Old Testament, since both the nature of the deity and the worldview is different, these arguments are useless and out of place in debating the existence of Yahweh. Moreover, one popular argument against the existence of God, the argument from evil, would hardly have justified atheism in the context of Old Testament Yahwism since many texts have no problem ascribing evil to Yahweh. In addition, it cannot be maintained that because the Old Testament is not interested in pondering the ontological status of YHWH or arguing for or against his existence that philosophers of Old Testament religion may not do so. The bracketing of ontology in Old Testament *theology* may be considered justified, but in a philosophy of Old Testament religion such evasion of a-theological dilemmas is out of the question. For even though it may be impossible to prove or disprove the existence of YHWH for a variety of reasons (e.g., pluralism, text-reality relations, etc.), there are no good grounds why discussions concerning realism and non-realism in Old Testament theology should be avoided altogether.
- Though evil may in some sense be problematic for Old Testament religion, one cannot speak of *the problem of evil* in the same sense as it features in Christian philosophy of religion. In the context of Old Testament Yahwism the issue is for the most part not the problem of reconciling the idea of an omnipotent and wholly good deity with the presence of evil in the world as it is the case in Christian philosophy of religion. All too often there is in the Old Testament a blatant acknowledgement that Yahweh is behind much of the metaphysical, moral and natural evil in ways that are anything but stereotypically orthodox from a popular Christian perspective. Thus the problem of evil in this case has to do with the manner, rather than the fact, of Yahweh's interventionist methodology in the distribution of evil within the cosmic and social orders. This means that not even the theodicy of process theology can be uncritically transposed into the Old Testament context, for though it recognises divine finitude as in the Old Testament, the differences in worldview and benevolence-factor make it anachronistic. The same goes for the allegedly biblical free-will theodicy, which is nothing of the sort, since YHWH is often depicted as overriding human free will and hardening human hearts. The problem of evil in the Old Testament should therefore rather be approached by philosophically analysing the relation between Yahweh and natural / moral / and metaphysical evil in the contexts of Old Testament narrative, prophecy, wisdom and lamentation, and by paying attention to the dual-causality involved in the free will vs. determinist motifs in the discourse – instead of trying to construct a theodicy or a-theology at all costs.

- In Christian philosophy of religion the issue of *religious experience* is dealt with from the frame of reference of stereotypical post-biblical Christian spiritualities. But there is a huge difference between philosophically analysing, let us say, Christian mysticism or conversion experiences, and doing the same with religious experiences in the Old Testament, for example theophanies, revelatory dreams, prophetic experiences, auditions, divination rituals, etcetera. In analysing the Old Testament's variety of religious experiences, philosophers of Old Testament religion will, as always, have to pay close attention to issues like form, content, textual intent, cultural factors influencing the presentation, rhetorical strategies, literary conventions, and so on. And as ontology cannot be bracketed with regard to the textual character of YHWH's relation to extra-textual reality, so too is it not possible to avoid asking questions otherwise bracketed, for example concerning the meaning and truth of Old Testament claims like 'YHWH said....', or 'YHWH appeared....' Or 'YHWH did...'
- With regard to *the relation between religion and morality*, the pluralism of the Old Testament as well as its pre-Christian ethics provide altogether different materials for scrutiny than do contemporary Christian ethics. However, even here one does not need to invent the wheel from scratch. Plato's Eutyphro's dilemma concerning the relationship between the gods and morality is still relevant and it might be interesting to read the Old Testament with the problem in mind so as to discover whether YHWH as depicted in a particular text is the determiner of the moral order or himself subsumed thereto. Yet, once again, there may be no one unified 'Old Testament view' on the matter and thus the possibility of theological pluralism also with regard to the relationship between the divine and morality as assumed in the Old Testament must be reckoned with. In addition, the fact that Old Testament scholarship has discovered many parallels between Old Testament morality and that of other ancient Near Eastern religions combined with the consigning of many details of the Sinai theophany as depicted in the texts to the status of fiction, also give rise to many interesting philosophical questions which are often evaded but which pop up every time the relationship between text and reality, or morality and ideology, becomes blurred. Thus, taking a long hard look at the Old Testament's ethical concepts, their meaning, their rationale, their utility function, their ontological status, etc., will all form part of this locus and will surely make for stimulating discussions.
- When it comes to *the relation between religion and culture*, one cannot use the format and frame of reference of Christian theology and western culture if one wishes to understand the issue in the context of Old Testament Yahwism. Here the Ancient Near-Eastern cultural context must provide the frame of reference via the findings of the history of religion and comparative religion, rather than those of systematic theology or Christian missio-

logy. Moreover, the religion-culture-relation as attested in the Old Testament as reconstructed in comparative religion raises interesting philosophical problems pertaining to what the ontological status of the divine world as cultural construct ultimately amounts to. For it can be argued that the god-talk and supernaturalist metaphysics of the Old Testament show marked traces not only of anthropomorphism but also of sociomorphism and psychomorphism, which in turn leads to the possibility of projection involved in the construction of the deity's profile and realm. This means realism becomes problematic, as it also does when parallels to the mythology of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures are demonstrated and the question is raised as to how, given such parallels, the ontological status of YHWH could be considered as being different from, say, El or Chemosh (cf. Jdg 11:24).

- When one attempts to ascertain *the relation between religion and history*, the traditional perspective on that relation as expressed in Christian theology is inadequate in terms of direct application to the Old Testament scenario. The critical-exegetical discoveries on the multiple genres in the text and the problematic relation between history and fiction as demonstrated in critical histories of Israel, as well as the presence of ideology in Old Testament stories about the past and future, all imply the need for serious reconsideration of the meaning of popular catchphrases like 'revelation in history'. Moreover, the nature of ancient historiography as well as the problems pertaining to the nature, contents and intentions of the Old Testament texts should determine the kind of questions the philosophical-critical analyst will eventually put forward on this particular issue and its sub-themes. One such sub-theme may involve pondering the rationale for many of the details in divine interventionist methodology and will involve questions like why YHWH wanted to do any particular thing at all (like create a world, choose a people, give them land, communicate via prophets, etc.) Once again, the bottom line is that nothing can be taken for granted and that everything can be philosophically interesting (i.e., problematic) if one asks the right questions.
- *Religious epistemology* in the Old Testament can also be at odds with what is taken for granted in this topic in contemporary Christian philosophy of religion. With regard to the problems of verification and falsification, the situation is more complex than in post-biblical theology, since all we have in the case of the Old Testament are the texts themselves. The possibility of empirical observation and quantification is thus ruled out and epistemic theories of justification like fideism and evidentialism should not be uncritically adopted in the study of pre-critical religious beliefs as such models may involve reductionism of phenomenologically dense (thick) description. Moreover, when the question is asked about how one can know the divine, the sheer variety of perspectives, the alien cognitive frame of reference, and the pre-Christian and oriental nature of the biblical truth-claims all warrant

a somewhat different approach to the issues involved in this locus and vis-à-vis Christian philosophy of religion. Thus, rather than approaching the texts with dogmatic presumptions, the epistemological assumptions of the Old Testament discourse itself will have to be identified, abstracted and reconstructed before these can be assessed from a philosophical perspective for the problems they pose. For, once again, simply projecting problems in religious epistemology derived from a philosophical analysis of Christianity onto the traditions of Old Testament Yahwism(s) would seem to be a methodologically suspect way of dealing with the issues involved.

- With regard to *paranormal religious phenomena* in the Old Testament, there is much overlap with what is of concern in mainstream philosophy of religion when it comes to the philosophical questions raised in response to it. However, the historical-critical study of texts witnessing to such phenomena have revolutionised the way biblical scholars think about the relation between the world in the text and the world outside it. Questions of genre, intertextuality, referentiality and the hermeneutics of recollection and suspicion (ideology) have all changed the way the Old Testament stories about miracles, theophany, divine action and other assorted supernatural phenomena are commonly viewed. This means, of course, that the constructive nature of these variables will give rise to the kind of philosophical questions (and prompt new theories in response to them) that are somewhat different from those found in Christian philosophy of religion where the issues are often reduced to a bothersome dichotomy in verificationist-falsificationist discussions on the relation between religion and science.
- *Religious concepts* in the Old Testament pose a special threat to anyone prone to equivocation and *eisegesis*. Thus when the philosopher of Old Testament religions analyses biblical concepts like ‘sin’, ‘god’, ‘salvation’, ‘truth’, ‘blessing’, ‘holiness’, etcetera, care must be taken not to commit fallacies of anachronism by reading later associative meanings into these words. To be sure, there may well be continuity and to rule out this possibility from the start is equally biased. Yet the analyst would do well to take cognisance of what biblical theologians and social-scientific scholars have discovered about the denotation and connotation of Old Testament religious concepts before discussing the related philosophical questions involved, the familiar answers to which have hitherto come from the ideas, perspectives and theories of philosophy of Christian religion. Moreover, as with all the other loci, the philosopher of Old Testament religion should take nothing for granted and ponder what is otherwise taken as a given. Thus, one would not only ponder the philosophical puzzles associated with the Old Testament’s concept(s) of ‘creation’ but go beyond that by discussing the philosophical problems implicit in the Old Testament answers to the question of why YHWH created the heavens and the earth in the first place and what the philosophical puzzles are that are implied in the Old Testament idea of a

‘beginning’ when one cannot fall back on a trans-temporal perspective on the relation between God and time.

- A philosophical analysis of the *religious practices* of the Old Testament contains the same pitfalls and prospects as those mentioned in connection with religious concepts above. Once again, in analysing Old Testament religious rites like prayer, sacrifice, divination, and other forms of worship and religious practices from a philosophical perspective, care must be taken. The philosopher of Old Testament religion must approach his inquiry in dialogue with anthropological, historical and biblical theological studies rather than simply taking for granted the applicability of what has been said about parallel activities in post-biblical Christian spirituality in mainstream philosophy of religion. However, unlike as is the case in Old Testament theology for example, the philosopher of Old Testament religion must ask whether the naturalist-supernaturalist dualism in modern Christian world-views is not a false dichotomy in the Old Testament where neither the concepts nor their reference may always be operative in texts which presume a more holistic and continuous relation between the divine and human realms. Moreover, the philosopher of Old Testament religion, unlike the Old Testament theologian, will not only ask how YHWH was worshipped but should at some point begin to wonder why Yahweh wants to be worshipped in the first place.
- On the topic of *religious pluralism* and the philosophical questions the phenomenon generates, the related problematic in the philosophical study of Old Testament Yahwism(s) will have to operate on at least two levels. On the one hand there is the familiar inter-religious truth claims over and against which the beliefs of Yahwism(s) assert themselves. On the other hand, the fact of intra-religious pluralism within the Old Testament itself and the theological and other related and relevant types of diversity and contradiction all pose specific philosophical challenges which should be reconstructed and discussed with attention to conceptual and fundamental aspects of the discourse.
- Finally, with regard to an issue such as *post-mortem existence* it is quite clear that the Christian vocabulary of eternity, immortality, souls, heaven and hell, and so on may well be out of place in the context of Old Testament Yahwism. And if the thanatological and anthropological concepts change, so does the format and contents of the philosophical problems to be identified, reconstructed and discussed. For though the Old Testament has no concept of the Christian heaven or hell, the idea of Sheol and everything related to it all give rise to philosophical problems that have not been sufficiently addressed in any philosophy of religion currently concerned with relation problems of post-mortem existence.

These are but some of the challenges which will be encountered in the process of adoption and adaptation.

7 Methodology in philosophy of Old Testament religion

For practical purposes, when it comes to methodology, a philosophical analysis of Old Testament religion might of necessity have to link up with the analytical tradition in mainstream philosophy of religion rather than with the continental alternative (on which see Long 2000 and Harris 2002). This is because the main concern is phenomenological and descriptive conceptual analysis (as is the wont of the analytical tradition) for the purpose of elucidating the biblical texts – and not so much with utilising biblical materials for coming up with a contemporary normative philosophical theory (as is the concern of the continental tradition) (see also Long 2002:424-452). Thus analytical philosophy of religion will make it possible to engage in the type of analysis that biblical scholars are limited to (what the texts meant) whereas with a more continental approach the concerns will start to spill over to systematic theology (what they may mean today).

In addition, a distinction may be drawn between micro-analysis (the exegetical analysis of individual texts via philosophical criticism, the exegetical approach discussed in Part 2), meso-analysis (philosophy of Old Testament religion limited to analysis of individual traditions, trajectories and books), and macro-analysis (philosophy of Old Testament religion as analysis of the entire Old Testament from the viewpoint of one particular locus on the agenda). So whereas philosophical criticism involves only micro-analysis (as discussed in Part 2 of this series – Gericke 2006d), philosophy of Old Testament religion can be practised on both the meso- and macro-levels (analogous to Old Testament theologies of the historical-critical type which deal with both the entire Old Testament and trajectories therein). Thus building on the insights of philosophical criticism, meso-analysis in philosophical reflection on Old Testament Yahwism will focus on large trajectories and traditions within the text, for example deuteronomistic/deuteronomistic history, post-exilic priestly redactions, entire books of the Old Testament; the Pentateuch or the prophets, etcetera. A simplistic overview of the hypothetical sequence of the steps involved in such meso-level analysis might be construed as follows:

1. Decide on the body of text to be analysed (i.e., a source, a tradition; a trajectory; a Book in the Old Testament, e.g. Jeremiah).
2. Identify a particular locus on the agenda of philosophy of religion of interest to the present research (this step and the previous one are in practice often interchangeable) (e.g., the justification of religious experience).
3. Collect all the data on the research findings of philosophical criticism with regard to the philosophical problems generated on the micro-level (i.e., the philosophical-critic should already have available the research findings

concerning the metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, logical, theological, and moral assumptions and claims in the texts and the philosophical-religious problems they generate).

4. Compare the various findings of the micro-analyses as these relate to each other on the meso-level (and note any (in)coherency of the data within the particular book/tradition/trajectory which then becomes part of the problem).
5. Reconstruct and discuss the philosophical problems implicit in the discourse and pertaining to the particular locus when viewed from a meso-level perspective (i.e., the perspective of the entire book/tradition/trajectory).

After meso-level analysis has been completed on all the books/trajectories and traditions present in the Old Testament, the philosopher of Old Testament religion has everything in place to move on to macro-analysis for the sake of ultimately writing a fully-fledged philosophy of Old Testament religion. In such macro-analysis, the philosophical-critic will discuss the entire Old Testament's perspectives on a specific locus (e.g., the nature of YHWH, or the nature of Yahwistic religious language, etc.). Of course, such analysis need not (should not!) assume any monolithic coherency on the meso-level or macro-level but will have to attempt a broad and overall view of the ideas in those textual scopes. If there are contradictions between various Old Testament texts on the topic in question (e.g., the nature of YHWH), this given simply becomes part of the philosophical puzzle and does not prohibit or short-circuit philosophical analysis. Moreover, attempts to solve this kind of puzzle do not necessitate harmonisation as in stereotypical fundamentalist apologetics but rather invites an attempt to spell out the philosophical implications of the incoherencies, whatever they may be. As for the most comprehensive form of the analytic process itself, macro-level analysis might in turn be conducted along the following lines:

1. Decide what locus on the agenda of the philosophy of religion is of interest for the purpose of analysis (e.g., the nature of YHWH).
2. Collect all the relevant views on the particular locus as reconstructed in micro- and meso-analysis.
3. Take cognisance of the philosophical puzzles already generated on the micro- and meso-levels.
4. View the various Old Testament perspectives on the locus as a singular whole so as to be able to discern subtle differences and similarities in the philosophical problems identified on the micro- and meso-levels.
5. Identify and reconstruct the philosophical puzzles that can be derived from viewing the data on the macro-level – the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

6. Discuss the philosophical problems pertaining to viewing the Old Testament as a whole in relation to the particular locus.

Once macro-analysis pertaining to all the loci on the agenda of philosophy of Old Testament religion has been completed, everything is in place for the production of a philosophy of Old Testament religion. But as in the writing of an Old Testament theology or a history of Israelite religion, writing a philosophy of Old Testament religion is only possible as the culmination of a long and arduous analytic journey from the micro-level, via the meso-level, to the macro-level. Only thus can the detailed, diverse, and distinct nature of the discourse be given its due and, even then the final product might well inform us more about the particular scholar than about the nature of the philosophical problems of Old Testament Yahwism.

8 Examples of philosophy of Old Testament religion in action

There is no room left in this article to provide an in-depth example of philosophy of Old Testament religion in action. However, a number of articles in this genre (and on the macro-level) have been written (see Gericke 2004; 2005a, 2005b, 2006a; 2006c; 2006e). These studies involved the entire Old Testament from the perspective of particular loci (and sub-loci) on the agenda in philosophy of Old Testament religion albeit on a small scale (journal-publication scope). Interested readers are referred to these articles to observe spatially-limited examples of philosophy of Old Testament religion (large-scale philosophical-critical analysis) in action.

C CONCLUSION

And so concludes the series of articles which I have dared to call the ‘Quest for a philosophical YHWH’. In this particular study, the motivation for and the theoretical contents of a philosophy of Old Testament religion were spelled out so as to contribute towards engagement by Old Testament scholars in a philosophical-critical analysis of the Old Testament as a whole. It is also hoped that other large-scale approaches to the study of the Old Testament might soon be supplemented by a philosophical approach to the study of Ancient Israelite religion. I hope that I have succeeded in making a small but pioneering contribution towards the wonderful field that is Old Testament scholarship. And I sincerely hope that the ideas presented in this article and in the two that went before – imperfect as they are – may one day be put to good use by others hoping to embark on the quest for a philosophical YHWH.

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