

## YHWH'S PERSONAL IDENTITY – A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

In this article a new riddle for Hebrew Bible theologians is introduced. It concerns the philosophical problem of YHWH's personal identity within the world in the text. Given theological pluralism in the deity's profile, what did being YHWH as depicted from one text to the next, necessarily consist in? In view of the seeming persistence of YHWH's identity over time, the question that is asked and answered is whether it is possible to offer criteria that will specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for being YHWH across all actual worlds in the text.

### INTRODUCTION

Many Hebrew Bible scholars will be familiar with the concept of "identity" in the context of the social sciences where it refers to a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations (such as national identity and cultural identity). In the study of ancient Israelite religion, the problem of identity has entered the discussion primarily with reference to the psychology of the stereotyped Hebrew male (see Köhler 1956; Clines 1995) and the social-political matrix of "ancient Israel" (see Davies 1992). Absent in biblical scholarship is research that takes an interest in the *philosophical* problems related to personal identity. These have been discussed since the origins of Western philosophy and most major figures have had something to say about it. Today personal identity remains an issue for both continental and analytic philosophy (Olson 2011:n.p.). The basic problematic in philosophical research on personal identity concerns

the question of what it takes for a person to persist from moment to moment – or in other words, for the same person to exist at different moments. Usually the problem takes on diachronic dimensions in that what is sought is a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the identity of persons over time. Yet there is also the synchronic problem of personal identity which involves the question of what features or traits characterize a given person at any one time (Olson

2011:n.p.).

Moreover, for the most part, what is of interest in philosophical discussions is actual human personhood rather than literary representations of divinity. This complicates the transference of issues in human identity to the identity of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible. In the past, research on YHWH's identity has been limited to literary (e.g., Carroll 1991; Miles 1995), theological (e.g., Brueggemann 1997), religio-historical (e.g., Miller 2000; Smith 2004) and social-scientific (e.g., Gottwald 1999) readings. What makes this study different from the above is the fact that its methodology is both philosophical and historical/descriptive. Wary of the danger of imposing distortive philosophical categories onto the Hebrew Bible's conceptual background, no attempt is made to construct any systematic or philosophically credible "biblical" perspective from the pluralistic ancient pre-philosophical texts. Rather, by asking the questions of philosophical identity theory in the context of the many and variable textual representations of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible, this article aims only at an elucidation of their complexity. No normative metaphysical claims are made with regard to the identity of any extra-textual God and all remarks pertain only to the literary character YHWH located within the world of the text.

## THE PROBLEM OF YHWH'S PERSONAL IDENTITY

### Basic questions

While most accounts of personal identity in philosophy proper deal with human personhood, the same questions may be reframed and applied to the person represented by the character "YHWH" in the Hebrew Bible. Following the exposé of the philosophical problem of personal identity by Korfmacher (2011:n.p.) and Olson (2011:n.p.), we may begin by noting that, from a philosophical perspective, there is no singular problem of YHWH's personal identity in the text. For this reason there can be only a wide range of loosely connected philosophical questions that can be asked with reference to the character of YHWH, including, *inter alia*, the following seven (adapted from Olson 2011:n.p.).

1. Who was the character of YHWH's "I" in the world of the text assumed to

be? Here we speak of YHWH's "personal identity" in the sense of that which was assumed to make YHWH the kind of person (in the philosophical sense) YHWH was believed to be. YHWH's identity will have consisted roughly in what was assumed to make YHWH unique as an individual and different from everything else. Of course, different texts offer different identity conditions for what made YHWH YHWH and no systematic account is possible. We may, however, in accepting theological pluralism still look at how YHWH was depicted as defining himself. Lacking self-affirmations in some contexts, we may look at the values and convictions the narrator uses to structure divine actions. YHWH's individual identity will then have been a property (or set of properties) instantiated by the character YHWH. Given the diachronic variability in characterization, however, the properties will have been those that YHWH only had contingently: YHWH's identity at  $t_1$  (time) might therefore have been different from the one YHWH has at  $t_2$ . Later representations of YHWH might have exchanged YHWH's earlier individual identity for a new one and in texts with minimalist characterization the narrator might have gotten by without any explicitly defined identity for YHWH's character.

2. Secondly, there was YHWH's godhood. What (as opposed to who), according to a given text, was YHWH assumed to be? What were assumed to be the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for something to count as the kind of entity YHWH was assumed to be? In other words, what was it about the character YHWH that made it seem meaningful to categorize YHWH as a god as opposed to something else? What generic properties did YHWH have to instantiate in order to be classified as a god? Also, what individual attributes did YHWH have that other gods did not? Wherein lay YHWH's uniqueness among the gods? At what point in the characterization does YHWH's otherness become apparent? Note that what is required here is more than a theology of YHWH's incomparability. A philosophical answer to the questions of what makes YHWH divine would take the form "Necessarily, YHWH is a god (or X is the god YHWH), if and only if ...YHWH..." with the blanks appropriately filled in.
3. From a philosophical perspective there is the mystery of YHWH's identity

persistence. What did it take for YHWH's character to persist from one span of narrated time to another – that is, for the same character to be recognizable as itself at different times within the world in the text? What sorts of changes could the characterization of YHWH involve and still be about YHWH? Conversely, we may also ask what boundaries would have to be crossed for YHWH-types of representation to come to an end? What determined which past or future version of YHWH was considered to be more YHWH-like? What was it about an earlier version vis-à-vis a later version of YHWH, aside from the personal name, that made it clear that one was dealing with YHWH? This is the question of YHWH's personal identity over time. An answer to it will be an account of YHWH's persistence conditions or a criterion of YHWH's personal identity over time.

4. Fourthly, we may inquire about the epistemology in YHWH's characterization in general, and evidence of YHWH's personal identity in particular. How, according to the texts, could the implied author/reader know that YHWH was appropriately characterized? What evidence bears on the question of whether YHWH in one text was recognizable as the same YHWH who was depicted earlier? What did it mean if different kinds of evidence supported opposing characterizations? One source of such evidence was, of course, first-person dialogue: if the character of YHWH referred to or remembered having done some particular action, then, according to that text, the deity in question is assumed to be YHWH. Another source of evidence would have been phenomenal continuity: if the character of YHWH looked just like the one who appeared earlier or was in some sense spatio-temporally continuous with YHWH, that might have been another reason to think it is YHWH one was dealing with. Which of these sources were assumed to be more fundamental? Moreover, given the fact that one was always dealing with a literary construct, could imagined first-person memory by the character YHWH count as evidence all by itself, or only insofar as it could be checked against other inter-textual (source-critical) evidence?
5. There is the issue of a complex "population" within the character of YHWH. If we think of the "persistence question" as asking which of the characterizations of YHWH introduced early in the history of Israelite

religion have survived to become the ones at the end of it, we may also want to ask how many of these versions are embodied in the character in any given text. How does one determine the presence of a multiplicity of divine typologies? If there are some, say seven, varieties of deity in YHWH's character in a particular representation, what facts – theological and literary, or what have you – made that the right number? The question is not historical or literary in the sense of what caused there to be a certain number of divine profiles in YHWH – e.g., a storm and solar deity – at a given time. It is philosophical in being concerned with what there being that particular number consisted in. This is the problem of “synchronic identity”, as opposed to the “diachronic identity” we encountered in the persistence question. It is not in this case about identity over time but identity at a given moment in time. These are not separate but it remains a fact that there are two kinds of situations where we can ask how many profiles of YHWH there are: synchronic situations involving just one representation of YHWH and diachronic ones involving many different historical contexts.

6. What sort of thing, metaphysically speaking, was YHWH assumed to be? This is not as above a question of genus, i.e., YHWH's being a god and what that consisted in. Rather, we are asking what was assumed about YHWH's basic metaphysical nature. For instance, what, according to any given text, did YHWH's body consist of? Was it spirit, matter, a mixture of the two or something else? Where were YHWH's spatial boundaries assumed to lie? More fundamentally, what was assumed to fix those boundaries? Was YHWH assumed to be a substance – a metaphysically independent being – or was YHWH assumed to be a state or an aspect of something else, or perhaps some sort of process or event? How variable in form could YHWH be and still retain his identity as YHWH? Which properties did YHWH have essentially, and which only accidentally or contingently?
7. What mattered in YHWH's identity? What was the practical importance in the text of facts about YHWH's identity and persistence for the deity himself? Why did it matter to YHWH? Why did the other characters or implied readers care about it? The only entity whose existence the character of YHWH could not ignore was his own. Within the world in the text,

YHWH had a special interest in his own life unlike he had with reference to that of anyone else. However, YHWH's identity seems to have mattered practically both to himself and to those who worshipped him and created him as a character in their narratives and poetry. In this question, then, the problem pertains to the purpose of the character YHWH's existence that allowed it to act in a way meaningful in relation to its identity.

These are some of the questions that have to be dealt with in the quest for a philosophical understanding of YHWH's personal identity in the Hebrew Bible. Though these seven questions are obviously related, it is hard to find any important common feature that makes them all questions about YHWH's assumed personal identity. They are different, and failing to keep them separate will cause conceptual confusion. In the next section we shall take a closer look at some important distinctions with regard to YHWH's personal identity, mainly with regard to the riddle of persistence.

### **Persistence problems vs. numerical/qualitative identity**

The question of persistence in YHWH's identity is one of the most pressing issues for any philosophical discussion on the subject. It is often confused with other questions, or stated in a tendentious way. The actual issue here concerns what was assumed to be necessary and sufficient for a past or future version of YHWH's character to remain YHWH. If we point to the character of YHWH in a given text and then describe the deity as represented to exist at another time, we can ask whether we are referring to one character twice, or referring once to two characters. The persistence question asks what determines the answer to such questions, or makes possible answers true or false (Olson 2011:n.p.).

The persistence question should not be confused with the question of numerical identity. YHWH (abbreviated to Y) in text (a) and YHWH in text (b) are numerically identical if and only if Y(a) and Y(b) are one entity rather than two. Technically, the personal identity of YHWH is an instance of the relation of YHWH's numerical identity even if this is not the same as the persistence problem. Investigations into the nature of this identity must respect the formal properties that govern qualitative identity. Y(a) and Y(b) are qualitatively identical if and only if, for the set of non-relational properties  $P_1 \dots P_n$  of Y(a),

Y(b) only possesses  $P_1 \dots P_n$ . (A property may be called “non-relational” if its being borne by a substance is independent of the relations in which property or substance stand to other properties or substances.)

Philosophically speaking, nothing could make YHWH numerically a different god from the one YHWH was assumed to be. For YHWH to be numerically different from himself is precisely for him not to be YHWH. This is not something that is the case with regard to personal identity in particular; it is simply a fact about the logic of identity (Korfmacher 2011:n.p.). To say that after a certain event in the narratives of Israelite religion (the Exodus or Exile, for instance), YHWH was a different god – or that YHWH was no longer the god he once was – presumably means that while YHWH *qua* character would still exist in the world in the text, views about his nature has changed in some important ways. This kind of talk is actually thinking of YHWH’s individual identity in the “Who is YHWH’s ‘I’?” sense. What is in view therefore is modality within the theological pluralism in the Hebrew Bible. It concerns the fact that in the history of Israelite religion YHWH’s character lost some of the properties that once made up YHWH’s individual identity at a given time and acquired new ones. However, this “Who is YHWH’s ‘I’?” question is not the persistence question.

The concept of numerical identity for YHWH was, however, not unimportant to the Hebrew Bible authors. Other characters could not call on YHWH without assuming that the entity called on was in fact YHWH (1 Kgs 18; but see 1 Kgs 19). Of course, that YHWH was often linked to certain cultic places introduced some plurality within unity before the Deuteronomic centralization of the cult. The claim that YHWH is one (Deut 6:4) presupposes a pre-philosophical awareness of the problem of diffused numerical identity in the deity. However, in biblical narratives, the character YHWH who regretted his own actions and held Israel accountable for breaking the covenant with him assumes numerical identity between multiple source characterizations. The question of what makes the many personas of YHWH numerically the same given theological changes over time is therefore what constitutes the heart of the diachronic problem of YHWH’s personal identity.

Just as the persistence question must not be confused with the question of numerical identity, the problem of YHWH’s numerical identity should not be

confused with the question of YHWH's qualitative identity. Y(a) and Y(b) are qualitatively identical when they are exactly similar. Alternative versions of YHWH are not qualitatively identical – one can usually tell them apart – even if in the tradition they are numerically identical: that's what makes YHWH a variable character. In literary fiction a past or future version of YHWH need not be, at that past or future time, exactly like YHWH at a given present point in order to be YHWH – that is, in order to be numerically identical with YHWH (cf. Miles 1995:2; Carroll 1991:44).

A character of fiction can be represented in many contradictory ways and be qualitatively different without losing its numerical identity. This is one reason why YHWH *qua* YHWH need not have remained qualitatively the same throughout the history of Israelite religion. YHWH's character definitely changed; for example, in general YHWH became more distant and mediated; new interpersonal relationships were formed with new human characters and others become memories; and so on (cf. Miller 2000:22; Smith 2004:12). So the question regarding the persistence of YHWH's character is not to be understood as asking what it took for a past or future version of YHWH to be qualitatively just like YHWH at any given time. It concerns what it took for a past or future being to be YHWH, as opposed to someone or something other than YHWH.

In the Hebrew Bible, it is numerical identity rather than qualitative identity thus assures YHWH's persistence over time. On this matter many historians of Israelite religion and Hebrew Bible theologians have been essentialists and Platonists, eagerly distinguishing between text and world, appearance and reality and between orthodox/true types of characterization vis-à-vis foreign/inauthentic varieties. But while modern scholarship recognizes the fictitious nature of the literary character YHWH, the question remains to what extent the authors of the texts assumed as much. Surely in the world in the text YHWH is not considered to be only a fiction. Surely the authors of each text considered their own versions of the deity to be authentic. The authors of some psalms or redactors of some sources and traditions were realists since they assumed the reference of the personal name YHWH to be an extra-textual reality – the rhetoric is far too serious (as opposed to being escapist fantasy) to imagine otherwise. That being said, it should be admitted that playful authors like those of sources traditionally

assigned to the so-called Yahwist or those of books such as Jonah and Job hint that they knew very well they were creating a god in their own image (Thompson 1999:317).

In the metaphysics of the world in the text, what accounts for the continuity of YHWH's person can be compared to what contemporary philosophers of mind refer to as "soul"-centred theories. Thus according to ancient Israelite theological mereology, YHWH too has a person (or *nephesh*) that anticipates, mourns, loves, abhors, is refreshed, is wearied, etc. (e.g., Lev 26:11-12; Isa. 42:1; Jer. 5:9, 6:8, 32:41; Zech 11:8, etc.). This was assumed to be some sort of core entity to whom thoughts and emotions occur. YHWH's character may change in form and be revealed in or accompanied by natural phenomena, yet around all the variable forms and manifestations thereof some inner essence of vitality was assumed to remain. And while neither philosophers nor Hebrew Bible scholars today may want to speak of YHWH's "soul" (in the Neo-Platonic/Christian sense), the folk-metaphysics in the world of the text often presupposes a rather similar notion as conceptually adequate (see Barr 1993:212)

If the confusion of qualitative with numerical identity is one source of misunderstanding about the persistence question for YHWH, another source of confusion is what it took for YHWH to remain the same kind of god over time (e.g., merciful, loving, just, and so on). The idea is that if YHWH's nature were to alter in certain ways (i.e., early dystheistic tendencies made way for a more benign precursor to later proto-perfect-being theologies) – then historically-critically one might wonder if YHWH is really the god he was before. For example, if early in the history of Israelite religion YHWH was credited with the actualization of metaphysical, moral and natural evil but later changed to become almost omnibenevolent then the question is whether and how we are dealing with the same god – i.e., which one is the real YHWH? Unless we consider severe mutability an option and stick with a literary ontology and fiction, this question is not easy to answer (but cf. Ps. 77).

There is another type of identity change in the Hebrew Bible. It is seen when tradition criticism reveals how the depiction of the contents of the character of YHWH's memories about memorable events changed (e.g., reconfigurations of the Exodus tradition; see Jer 7:22; Amos 5:25; contra Leviticus; see Cupitt

1980:147). This also occurred when the depiction of YHWH's personality was changed dramatically via the introduction or conflation of multiple sources or the introduction of new mythological motifs (e.g., in Hosea or Ezekiel). Then there are the results of redaction criticism which showed with reference to minimalist contexts how YHWH's character (or the divine will) underwent a profound moral makeover in post-exilic editorial emendations of legal precepts.

Given these diachronic changes, also the question of what it took for YHWH to remain the same kind of god is related to but not identical to the persistence question. It is not even a question about numerical identity. If it were, it would answer itself: YHWH necessarily remains numerically the same for as long as YHWH exists. Asking about YHWH's identity thus needs to specify whether what is meant refers to: numerical identity, qualitative identity, individual psychological identity, or something else. Otherwise, conceptual confusion is inevitable.

### **Reductionist perspectives**

Possible answers to the question of YHWH's personal identity and the character's persistence over time are many. For similar reasons, contemporary personal identity theory in philosophy proper often works with reductionist perspectives, concentrating on the relative merits of different criteria of identity and related methodological questions (below adapting the outline by Korfmacher 2011:n.p.). Transposing the matter to the study of the Hebrew Bible, reductionist theories of YHWH's personal identity will have in common the contention that facts about YHWH's personal identity stood in an adequate reduction-relation to sets of sub-personal facts  $SF_1..SF_n$  about property continuities in such a way as to issue in biconditionals of the form "Y(a) at  $t_1$  is identical to Y(b) at  $t_2$  if and only if Y(a) at  $t_1$  and Y(b) at  $t_2$  stand in a continuity-relation fully describable by  $SF_x$ ".

Thus, any given set of sub-personal facts will impose demands, in forms of necessary and sufficient conditions, upon the kinds of adventures the character of YHWH could survive in persisting from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$ . The sets of necessary and sufficient conditions determined by these sets of sub-personal facts will have constituted the various criteria of YHWH's personal identity. In a search for the necessary and sufficient conditions for the sustenance of personal identity

relations between representations of YHWH, the question to be asked concerns which type of continuity-relations *SF* could describe. Almost all proposed answers to the persistence question will then fall into one of three categories.

### **Psychological approaches**

Most philosophers writing on personal identity since the early twentieth century have endorsed some version of what is called the “psychological approach” (see Korfmacher 2011:n.p. for further details). On this view some psychological relation is necessary or sufficient (or both) for YHWH to persist. If we opt for psychological criteria of YHWH’s personal identity we hold that psychological continuity relations in the text, that is, overlapping chains of direct psychological connections (beliefs, desires, intentions, experiential memories, character traits and so forth) constitute the character YHWH’s personal identity. There are three versions of the psychological criterion: the “narrow” version demands psychological continuity in YHWH to be caused *normally*, the “wide” version permits any *reliable* cause, and the “widest” version allows *any* cause to be sufficient to secure psychological continuity (see Korfmacher 2011:n.p.).

Many biblical theologians would regard as obvious the idea that the character of YHWH’s persistence is intrinsically related to the continuity in the divine psychology. The problem of cashing out this conviction in theoretical terms, however, will be notoriously difficult. Tradition and redaction criticism show variation in the details of the character of YHWH’s memories so that accounts tend to differ in details (cf. the variable *ipsissima verba* in the different rationales behind the Sabbath commandment in Ex 20 vs. Deut 5). The question biblical scholars should ask is whether it makes sense to apply this criterion when any memory of YHWH is involved. Surely YHWH’s psychological profile is relative to whatever the narrator of the mental life of this character makes it to be.

### **Somatic perspectives**

A second idea might be that YHWH’s identity through time consists in some brute physical relation. YHWH is that past or future being that has YHWH’s body, or is the same divine being that he is (e.g., Sommer 2011). This can be called a somatic approach and should not be confused with the view that physical

evidence has some sort of priority over psychological evidence in finding out if the character is YHWH, which has to do with the evidence question (Olson 2011:n.p.). In the world of the text YHWH is usually not assumed to be omnipresent in the technical sense but appears to be located wherever his character's body pops up. YHWH's body is not often referred to, but it tends to be presupposed in the character's appearance, movements, references to divine body parts, the use of certain objects, etc. (Sommer 2011:3).

A few biblical scholars endorse the somatic approach. Here, however, they are again Platonists, assuming that YHWH's body is only human in appearance (YHWH allegedly only "appears in human form"). These theologians like to speak of anthropomorphism and metaphor even when the texts clearly presuppose that YHWH's original form is in fact humanoid (because humans were literally created in the divine image) and that religious language describing YHWH's body can be univocally applied. Again the argument in favour of this claim is the way the character relates to itself and everything else. So while many biblical theologians would say that YHWH is incorporeal for the sake of being philosophically-vogue, this is anachronistic and not at all a historically-descriptive assessment. In any case, whenever continuity in YHWH's character was assumed to involve YHWH's being a distinct embodied being (e.g., theophanies), the texts often assumed that some sort of bodily criterion of YHWH's personal identity was epistemologically sufficient.

There is a downside to this view. If YHWH *qua* god could change form, it complicates using embodiment as a criterion. Moreover, aniconic trajectories assume that there should not (cannot?) be a pictorial identity marker for YHWH. That being said, elements of the somatic approach have the virtue of being compatible with related elements in ancient Israelite error-theories of allotheism. So while the polemical critique that idols do not display vital signs and actions presuppose divine embodiment, this was often fluid (Sommer 2011:2; see also Psalm 94; Isa 44).

### **Anti-criterialism**

Both the psychological and somatic approaches to YHWH's personal identity would agree that in the world of the text it was assumed that there is something

that it takes for YHWH to persist – that YHWH’s identity through time consisted in or necessarily followed from something other than itself. A third view, anti-criterialism, would deny this. We see this whenever commentators imply that there were no informative, non-trivial persistence conditions for YHWH. That is, the character of YHWH’s personal persistence was assumed to be an ultimate and unanalyzable fact operating according to the boundless rules of fiction (Carroll 1991:37). While psychological and physiological continuities are evidential criteria, these do not constitute necessary and/or sufficient conditions for YHWH’s personal identity.

We may distinguish between two versions of anti-criterialism (Olson 2011:n.p.) Either it is non-reductive and wholly non-informative, denying that YHWH’s personal identity follows from anything other than itself. Here the label “identity mysticism” (IM) is most appropriate (Korfmacher 2011:n.p.): IM:  $Y(a)$  at  $t_1$  is identical to  $Y(b)$  at  $t_2$  if and only if  $Y(a)$  at  $t_1$  is identical to  $Y(b)$  at  $t_2$ . The idea of identity mysticism will sound strange, given that Hebrew Bible theologians of the past have denied any mystical ideas in ancient Israelite religion (e.g., Eichrodt). The view plays only an indirect role in contemporary personal identity theory and is to be distinguished from a more popular version of the simple view, according to which personal identity relations are weakly reductive (WR) and in independence non-informative (INI): WR-INI:  $Y(a)$  at  $t_1$  is identical to  $Y(b)$  at  $t_2$  if and only if there is some fact  $F_1$  about  $Y(a)$  at  $t_1$ , and some fact  $F_2$  about  $Y(b)$  at  $t_2$ , and  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  are irreducible to facts about the subjects’ character, and  $Y(a)$  at  $t_1$  is identical with  $Y(b)$  at  $t_2$  in virtue of the fact that the propositions stating  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  differ only insofar as that “ $Y(a)$ ” and “ $t_1$ ” occur in the former where “ $Y(a)$ ” and “ $t_2$ ” occur in the latter. WR-INI is weakly reductive in the sense that, while the identity relation in question can be reduced to a further domain, the further domain itself typically exhibits elements of non-reducibility and/or resistance to full physical explanation (Korfmacher 2011:n.p.).

In their most prominent variants, these elements are due to references to spiritual or immaterial substances and/or properties. WR-INI may entail IM but does not do so necessarily: it is conceivable that personal identity relations for YHWH consisted in something which was itself neither identical with nor

reducible to a spiritual substance nor identical with nor reducible to aggregates or parts of character traits. If this was the case with YHWH's characterization then it was merely weakly reductive, however, because the identity of the phenomenon that specified the necessary and sufficient conditions for YHWH's personal identity did not itself follow from anything other than itself. While a weakly reductive criterion of personal identity relations is explicable in terms of the identities of phenomena other than YHWH's person, the identities of these phenomena themselves are not explicable in other terms: their identity may have been, as we would suppose "soul identity" to be, "strict and philosophical", and not merely "loose and popular" (Korfmacher 2011:n.p.).

### **Narrative identity?**

Thus far we have been assuming that the criterion of personal identity involves a "re-identification question": what were the conditions under which YHWH as depicted in one text could be properly re-identified in another text? Answering this question calls for a criterion of numerical identity for YHWH across time, a criterion of what makes YHWH as characterized the same thing as itself at different times.

For Ricoeur (1991), by implication the divine self's identity would be constituted by an inextricable tie between such selfsameness and a self-constancy that maintains its identity through change over time. Following the distinction in Latin between *idem* and *ipse*, YHWH's *idem*-identity is that which gives him, among other things, its spatio-temporal sameness. Its *ipse*-identity is what accounts for its unique ability to initiate something new and imputable to a divine self, be it oneself or another, as agent. Without both sorts of identity there is no self in YHWH's character. Because YHWH had both an *idem*-identity and an *ipse*-identity, the god inhabits two irreducible orders of causality, namely, the physical and the intentional orders. A comprehensive account of any genuine action must express the way it is related to both of these orders (Dauenhauer & Pellauer 2011:n.p).

The constitutive features of any narrative form the basis for Ricoeur to hold that YHWH's personal identity, itself constituted by an *idem*-identity and an *ipse*-identity, always involves a narrative identity (Ricoeur 1991:137). First,

biblical narratives draw together disparate and somehow discordant elements into the concordant unity of a plot that has a temporal span. Second, the elements and episodes that a biblical narrative unites involve contingencies. All of them could have been different or even nonexistent. Nonetheless, as employed, these elements take on the guise of necessity or at least of likelihood because they are followable (Dauenhauer & Pellauer 2011:n.p.).

In sum, a narrative about YHWH's persons tells of both the connections that unify multiple actions over a span of time performed, in most cases, by a multiplicity of personas and the connections that link multiple viewpoints on and assessments of those actions. "The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (Ricoeur 1992:147–48). On this view, we make sense of YHWH's personal identities in much the same way as we do of the identity of characters in stories. First, in the case of stories, we come to understand YHWH by way of the plot that ties together what happens to him, the aims and projects YHWH adopts, and what he actually does. Similarly the narrators made sense of YHWH's identity by telling stories about YHWH's life. In neither case is the identity like that of a fixed structure or substance. These identities are mobile. Until the story is finished, the identity of YHWH's character or person remains open to revision (Dauenhauer & Pellauer 2011:n.p.).

Second, as Dauenhauer & Pellauer (2011:n.p.) implies, YHWH's individual identity always intersects those of other personages in the narrative. This intersection can give rise to second-order stories, e.g., stories about families, that narrate the intertwining of multiple individual stories. Similarly, the story by which YHWH constitutes his own identity shows that his life is always linked to others, not always in the way his character would prefer. Hence, other persons are always constituents in YHWH's identity and vice versa. Indeed, YHWH's individual identities are incorporable into a we-identity, as for example the identity characters share as biblical personas.

According to Dauenhauer & Pellauer (2011:n.p.), Ricoeur's analysis of personal narrative identity yields four conclusions that are basic to his anthropology. We can make sense of YHWH only in and through his

involvement with others. In his dealings with others, YHWH does not simply enact a role or function that has been assigned to him. YHWH can change. Nonetheless, because YHWH is an embodied existence and hence has constraints, he cannot change everything about himself. And because others are similarly constrained, YHWH cannot sensibly call for comprehensive changes in them. Though YHWH can be evaluated in a number of ways, the ethical evaluation in the light of his responsiveness to others, over time, is, on the whole, the most important evaluation.

However, according to Schechtman (1996) what is actually more appropriate is an attempt to answer the “characterization question”. In short, this approach asks about the conditions under which various psychological characteristics, experiences, and actions were properly attributable to YHWH? One reason to turn to this question may stem from recognizing the metaphysical difficulties various theories of numerical identity run into (Schoemaker 2011:n.p.). Here the concern aligns with the notion of divine action in the narrative: “What makes those actions for which YHWH was held responsible, YHWH’s?” And in each case, what makes some feature YHWH’s may actually be making reference to a non-numerical type of identity, a type of identity encountered in the crises of belief in ancient Israel: “Who was YHWH really?” This is the question of identity as proper attributability, as providing an account of what is supposed to be YHWH’s true self and the various attributes genuinely belonging to it.

In other words, as Schoemaker (2011:n.p.) notes, we are dealing with the “narrative criterion of personal identity”: what made an action, experience, or psychological characteristic properly attributable to YHWH (and thus a proper part of YHWH’s true identity) is its correct incorporation into the stories featuring the character of the same name. Narrative identity is thus really about a kind of psychological unity in the character of YHWH, but not just an artless or random unity. For YHWH to have a personal identity, the character’s experiences must have been actively unified, must have been gathered together into the life of one narrative ego by virtue of stories that weaved them together, giving them a kind of coherence and intelligibility they wouldn’t otherwise have had. This was how the various experiences and events come to have any real meaning at all – rather than being merely isolated events – by being part of a

larger collection of stories that related them to one another within the context of YHWH's textual representations (Schoemaker 2011:n.p.).

The "narrative criterion of personal identity" purports to account for the character of YHWH's overridingly ethical concerns in a far more adequate way than accounts of numerical identity. So it makes sense for YHWH's character to anticipate via disclosure through prophetic revelation or inter-textual allusion some future experiences that will fit coherently and accurately into the on-going stories featuring YHWH himself. By way of the popular distinction between narrated time and time of narration, YHWH's character was depicted as constantly extending grand narratives into the future. The narrative criterion implies that what made some past action YHWH's (for which YHWH became worthy of praise or blame) was that it flowed from what was believed to be the character of YHWH's own central values, beliefs, and experiences, that there was a coherent story that can be told uniting it to the other elements of the character's life (Schoemaker 2011:n.p.).

There are, nevertheless, problems with this account. For one thing, it is not entirely clear why on the level of the metaphysical assumptions of the world in the text a narrative was necessary to unite the various experiences and events of YHWH's life into a coherent whole. The character may have robust psychological unity without having any kind of story of the past attached to it (e.g., Gen 1). But even if we allow for biblical narratives to do this work, or for third-person narratives to count, it remains unclear just what role a narrative would be playing here at all. For surely given the theological pluralism in the text we must allow that, depending on the point of view in the text we opt for, some narratives were assumed to get it wrong, and if we allow for that, then it seems we must admit that it isn't the narrative itself that *made* the various events and experiences united with one another; rather, they must be united with one another independently, and the (correct) narrative just serves as a kind of post hoc overlay, an articulation of the pre-existing unity (Korfmacher 2011:n.p.).

Perhaps the most serious concern comes from the fact that, as it stands, narrative identity depends on numerical identity (DaGrazia 2005:62). What matters to the narrator is the necessary presupposition that YHWH himself persists, but this is an issue of numerical identity. Another way to put this is that

YHWH could not be a person, on the narrative view, unless the character of YHWH gathered up the various experiences as a subject into a coherent narrative. But then the identity of YHWH as subject of experiences must have been preserved without changes across time for its experiences to be so gathered up. Whether this was done is out of the question, yet the fact remains that narrative identity for YHWH presupposes numerical identity.

### **The trouble with literary ontology**

In order to discover the Hebrew Bible's own pre- or folk-philosophical attitudes towards the issue of YHWH's personal identity, however, we may the question of what an author had to do in order to recreate YHWH in YHWH's own image within a new historical or literary or social context. We can investigate how it could be ascertained whether the resulting character was indeed a candidate for being identical with YHWH as represented long before. If there were such a thing as a stable and recognizable character for YHWH then some conditions would have been necessary and sufficient for YHWH to persist. Within the world in the text, those conditions would have involved psychology, or brute physical continuity, etc. – or they are trivial and uninformative, as anti-criterialism has it.

In research on YHWH's identity in some larger overlapping parts of biblical literature, this is certainly the way to go. Within larger trajectories (e.g., Deuteronomistic history) there is some sense of psychological continuity in the sense that the character of YHWH tends to appeal to memories of his own earlier relations with Israel. In other post-exilic combinations of pre-exilic sources, the character expressing YHWH's current thoughts at the time of narration was assumed to be an aggregate of multiple previous character-stages, each of which is in some sense psychologically continuous with each of the others and not with anything else. Here the personal identity of YHWH's character did persist by virtue of psychological continuity, i.e., YHWH's temporal boundaries are determined by relations of psychological *connectedness*.

Overall, however, we may at last admit that given the theological pluralism in the text, YHWH's personal identity is simply indeterminate. There are prototypes and proxytypes for YHWH's character in the sense of typicality effects for the category "God", thus making some characterizations seem more authentic than

others to the mind of a modern reader. From a historical, descriptive and pan-biblical perspective, however, it is more functional to use a model where YHWH is simply said to be identical to all his representations, no matter how diverse these may be. For the history of Israelite religion shows us that:

- biblical authors could give YHWH an appearance which bears no physical continuity or causal relation to the one YHWH possessed before that text;
- biblical authors could give new form or content to YHWH's psychology, that is, that it is not necessary or sufficient for the new version of YHWH to remember all of his own character's previous actions or experiences and that there do not have to be any causal connections between all the actions and experiences of YHWH from before; and
- The readerly question of whether or not the resulting version of YHWH is "truly" or "purely" Yahwistic or, by converse, alien to orthodox Yahwism, is objectively speaking essentially pejoratively ideological and/or meaningless.

This study's own suggestion is therefore that there is no unique right answer to the question of what it took for the character YHWH to persist as YHWH. There are many Wittgensteinian "family resemblances" between different characterizations but no essential properties or haecceities evident within the deity's multiple profiles. The identity of YHWH in Daniel and Qoheleth (though not named as such), for example, though both late representations, seems to presuppose two completely different sets of necessary and sufficient identity conditions. In every textual representation where YHWH was depicted, there was a temporal part of YHWH that existed only then. This gives us many likely character candidates for being YHWH, all of which are dependent on the context, and may assume but not instantiate a combination of psychological, somatic and non-definable types of continuity in YHWH's personal identity.

Theologically, because many mainstream Hebrew Bible scholars are Christians who both accept pluralism yet remain Platonists at heart, they will continue to make a distinction between YHWH's absolute and relative identity. Others will assume the deity's character to be textually immanent with no extra-textual reference (Brueggemann 1997:117). These critical and non-realist views recognise that the personal identities of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible take the form of a polythetic group with a spectrum of relative identities. Towards the

near end of the spectrum, characterizations of YHWH at  $t_1$  are almost identical with characterizations of YHWH at  $t_2$  and towards the far end of the spectrum characterizations of YHWH at  $t_1$  are not identical with characterizations of YHWH at  $t_2$  at all. There could not be evidence for the existence of a sharp borderline between the cases in which characterizations of YHWH at  $t_1$  *are* and the cases in which YHWH at  $t_1$  *are not* identical with YHWH at  $t_2$ . Hence, it is implausible to believe that such a borderline exists and YHWH's absolute identity is indeterminate while relative identities have been fixed by way of representation and canonization.

On a more pedantic level, it will be granted that because we are technically dealing with a literary construct, YHWH, like "Zeus" or "Ba'al", "is simply whatever character the Hebrew Bible calls "YHWH". Its identity involves all that YHWH's characterizations linked to the Hebrew Bible's proper names and pronouns for the deity refer to. Every representation of YHWH just is YHWH as every representation of – to be crude – Donald Duck just is Donald Duck, no matter how contradictory the details (see Cupitt 1997:124). Hence the characterizations of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible are linked as a "rhizome" and his identity a "becoming-other" or "multiplicity" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:22). Different utterances of the divine name will probably refer ambiguously to different candidates: to various sorts of psychologically interrelated aggregates, to a divine body, and perhaps to others as well. That would make it indeterminate which things, even which kind of things, the multiplicity that is the character YHWH was assumed to be. And insofar as the different candidates have different persistence conditions, it has always remained diachronically indeterminate what YHWH's identity over time consisted in.

## CONCLUSION

Questions concerning YHWH's personal identity and especially the persistence of that identity through time are interesting and important philosophical issues that Hebrew Bible theologians can validly address. An introductory account was given of how we might begin to describe how it was possible that the Hebrew Bible is able to refer to the same deity despite incommensurable property clusters

for its person. Whether the philosophy of fiction or the philosophy of mind is best able to give an account on this matter is not an either/or but a both/and issue. It will be unfruitful to work along essentialist or realist lines and many discussions of personhood in philosophy proper are not applicable to the literary ontology of the Hebrew Bible where the identity of YHWH correlates with the laws of characterization in fiction. A non-essentialist approach to the matter is therefore best able to make sense of and do justice to the complexities and indeterminacy of the character YHWH's personal identity. Yet what was said here is but what it could be: a *prolegomenon* – there is much more detailed research waiting to be done.

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