

POSSIBLE ANALOGIES FOR IMAGINING FOLK- PHILOSOPHIES IN ANCIENT ISRAELITE RELIGION

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We are not accustomed to think of the Old Testament as a book of philosophy.¹

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author seeks to facilitate the process of imagining the presence of philosophical assumptions *in* the religious language of the Hebrew Bible. After a meta-philosophical deconstruction of the concept of “philosophy” to blur the lines with folk-philosophies, the article seeks to dispute the scholarly consensus alleging the complete absence of philosophical data in ancient Israelite religion. This is done by way of several possible analogies² for conceiving of philosophy in Yahwism(s), e.g., historical approaches in Jewish Philosophy, Area Studies in ancient Near Eastern philosophy, the methodological debates in African Philosophy, recent research on philosophy in literature and a century of philosophical approaches to the study of myth.

FOLK PHILOSOPHY

Many biblical scholars think of “philosophy” in stereotyped formats. Discourse is considered philosophical in nature if and only if its mode of expression approximates certain examples of Greek substantive philosophy, medieval scholastic metaphysics, modern secular critical philosophy or twentieth-century analytic philosophy. Not finding anything remotely like this in the Hebrew Bible, many biblical theologians and historians of Israelite religion defiantly deny the presence of any philosophical data in ancient Israelite religious discourse altogether (see Knierim 1995:410).

As part of a further attempt at alienation, ancient Yahwism is construed as pre-philosophical – even anti-philosophical. Ironically, however, the philosophy bashing that masquerades as hermeneutical sensitivity is not as historical-critical and ideology conscious as it presents itself to be. On the contrary, as this

¹ Patterson (1952:20).

² The concept of this paper and the fruitful employment of analogy was inspired by James Barr's notion of “Historical theology – a possible analogy?” (Barr 1999:209-221).

article will attempt to show, any denial of all things philosophical in the Hebrew Bible is actually a vestige of projection in Orientalism and a subtle form of western colonialist intellectual imperialism in the study of the ancient Near East.

To justify this seemingly outrageous claim, consider the phenomenon of “folk-philosophy”. The concept of folk-philosophy is most prominent in comparative philosophy, area philosophy and world philosophy dealing with ancient and/or non-western cultural worldviews. It refers to the taken-for-granted metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and other assumptions that underlie the worldviews embodied in ordinary language and in myth, proverbs and songs. It comes to us in the form of philosophical presuppositions about reality, existence, life, knowledge, truth, belief, morality, etc., that went without saying. These presuppositions do not themselves represent conscious critical philosophical reflection by the agents holding them, even though such reflection, whether witting or not, lies in the communal past. In short, all cultures, whether living or dead, Western or Eastern, philosophical or mythological, have folk-philosophies that are implicit in their ordinary language. This means that ancient Israel is no exception.

However, there is more. Folk-philosophies can be accessed via the philosophical analysis of a people’s literature, whatever its genres. In other words, working with the relevant data, philosophers engaged in the clarification of the conceptual content of worldviews can, as Smart (2008:5) suggests, show the “philosophies” operative in anyone’s use of language for the purpose of representation:

It is possible to extract a world-view from a person’s thinking and living, even when he or she is not mainly concerned with presenting a system.

If this is true, it follows that the Hebrew Bible and philosophical analysis are no longer at odds with each other. In fact, there is reason to believe that unless we discern the folk-philosophies in Israelite religion we have not yet begun to understand biblical worldviews and are even more prone to project anachronistic Western, Christian folk-philosophical theological assumptions onto Yahwistic religious language. Of course, the question remains exactly how we might conceive of the Hebrew Bible as a philosophically interesting text

given its pluralist, complex, and literary nature. In the remainder of this paper, therefore, I wish to offer a few philosophical analogies from a number of subfields in philosophy itself that might assist biblical scholars in getting to grips with the idea of ancient Israelite thought as “philosophical” in some sense.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTIONS TO JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

A first analogy for how one might think of the Hebrew Bible as nascent folk-philosophy comes to us in the form of historical approaches in Jewish philosophy. To be sure, most Jewish philosophy today is not about furnishing a descriptive philosophical clarification of ancient Yahwism. However, there is a possible analogy for the approach developed in this study in contemporary historical introductions to the field when there is talk about the “roots”, “foundations”, “first principles”, “origins”, “sources” and “background” to Jewish philosophy proper (see Frank, Leaman, & Mannekin 2000; Carmy and Shatz 2003). In such cases, Jewish philosophers seek to clarify the philosophical assumptions implicit in the Hebrew Bible as introduction to later philosophical problems, e.g., divine-command ethics.

Here the possibility of a purely descriptive approach that is both historical and philosophical is taken for granted. It is recognized that the Hebrew Bible, though not a philosophical textbook, does indeed contain philosophical assumptions. Norbert Samuelson (2006:11), discussing the history of Jewish philosophy from the formation of the Hebrew Scriptures to the present time, states:

We begin the story of Jewish philosophy with the Hebrew Scriptures. In truth, this compilation of ancient Hebrew writings is not a work of philosophy.

In discussing the topic “*On the Hebrew Scriptures being Jewish and philosophical*,” Samuelson (2006:16) wrote:

Implicit within the words of the biblical text is a world and life-view that is itself philosophical, because it includes claims about all the central topics of philosophical inquiry.

Samuelson elsewhere offers a fine example of how philosophy of religion is

mixed with the Hebrew Bible in historical Jewish philosophy in his *Revelation and the God of Israel* (Samuelson 2002:11-21). The book includes a descriptive clarification on ideas in the Hebrew Bible with a combined philosophical and historical interest, showing it can be done. What makes this relevant is that nowadays it is not an idiosyncratic opinion by any means.³ The same descriptive philosophical concern with the Hebrew Bible is also reflected in “The Bible and philosophical exegesis” discussed in the section on “Foundations and first principles” in *The Jewish philosophy reader* (Frank, Leaman, & Mannekin 2000:3-38). In yet another related work we encounter Carmy and Shatz (2003:13) and their notion of “*The Bible as a source for philosophical reflection*”:

Is the Bible a source for philosophical reflection? A natural reaction is that it is. The Bible depicts the character of God, presents an account of creation, posits a metaphysics of divine providence and divine interventions, suggests a basis for morality, discusses many features of human nature, and frequently poses the notorious conundrum of how God can allow evil. Surely then it engages questions that lie at the heart of Jewish philosophy and religious philosophy generally. Yet the categorization of the Bible as philosophy must be qualified. For the Bible obviously deviates in many features from what philosophers (and especially those trained in the analytical tradition) have come to regard as philosophy.

This is clearly not a pre-critical dogmatic variety of Jewish philosophy lacking in critical-historical consciousness of the problems involved in philosophical reflection on the Hebrew Bible. The difference between the biblical scholar's interest and this historical variety of Jewish philosophy is that the Hebrew Bible can now be an end in itself rather than one of many resources utilized in such a way that the texts may somehow contribute to discussions of philosophical problems in contemporary philosophical debates. As Carmy and Shatz (2003:16) note:

³ See also the use of philosophy in the popular sense, e.g., Neumark (1918), or a more specific focus in Efros (1964).

In the remainder of this chapter, we hope to illustrate the possibilities of a meaningful encounter between Bible and philosophy, one that will accord the Bible its rightful place among the sources of Jewish philosophy without exaggerating its analytical character and without blurring the lines between its formulations of certain problems or approaches and the formulations of later philosophers. Needless to say, someone mining for philosophical ore is not likely to treat the Bible as scholars in other fields would. Consequently, we have to gloss over and bracket a variety of linguistic, historical and literary issues that could either compliment or undermine our suggestions.

The same line of thought so very different from stereotypical thinking on the Hebrew Bible in relation to things philosophical is Schweid & Levine's *Philosophy of the Bible as foundation of Jewish culture* (2008). This work has a relevant chapter entitled "Philosophy of the biblical narrative" and commences with the question "Is there philosophy in the Bible?" (Schweid & Levine 2008:39):⁴

In Chapter 1 of *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (Berlin, 1919), Hermann Cohen asserts that even if the critics of Maimonides are right in their claim that the Bible contains no philosophical thought in the strict methodological sense, nevertheless it is replete with insights of a philosophical character that do not fall short in profundity, complexity and consistency from those of the great philosophers.

The first example cited as evidence of philosophical data in the text is Exodus 3 and the revelation of the Divine Name, the commentary on which seems to Cohen to presuppose some philosophical reflection. Even though not understood exactly in the way the Septuagint or Greek substantive philosophy understood the divine names as referring to the givenness of Being, there is still

⁴ See also a related discussion in Hyam Maccoby (2002). In the first chapter, the author deals with the question of whether there is philosophy in the Talmud, ultimately arguing against stereotypes to show implicit philosophical ideas in the texts. The well-known scholar Jacob Neusner also frequently refers to "philosophy" in ancient rabbinic writings.

something metaphysical in the self-expression of Yhwh. Cohen himself acknowledged this quasi-philosophical passage is of a rare type in the Hebrew Bible but considers the love of wisdom in ancient Israelite religion to differ from other philosophy only in degree, not in kind – it is philosophy of volition rather than of reason. On this view, the Hebrew Bible allows for a different mode of philosophizing, one not discredited as philosophy simply because it was conducted in a fashion different from Western stereotypes. For Cohen, then, the Bible embodied a philosophical vision even if it does not express it in abstract conceptual terms (a kind of distinction mentioned by Aristotle) (Schweid & Levine 2008:40)

These are but some examples of a handful of many contemporary historical introductions to Jewish philosophy that discuss “philosophy” in the Hebrew Bible. More instances of similar pursuits could be given, yet these must suffice to illustrate the acknowledgement of the possibility of historical concerns with the Hebrew Bible within Jewish philosophy. In this sense then, histories of Jewish philosophy offer a possible analogy for how the Hebrew Bible can be seen as a potential resource for folk-philosophical assumptions in ancient Israelite religion.

(Ancient Near) Eastern philosophy

Most histories of Western philosophy continue to think of all philosophy as Greek philosophy, having begun inexplicably in the sixth century B.C.E. as though in isolation and without precursor. Yet the story is more complex and the thesis that Greek philosophy was not an original Greek invention, but comes from ancient Near Eastern precursors, is neither a post-modern nor a modern one (Burkert 2008:60). The thesis is already attested in Aristotle’s *On philosophy* and his pupils discussed the *barbaros philosophia* as they took account of Egyptian, Chaldean, Iranian and Jewish sages. One of them, Damascius, in his book on first principles, quotes from the first lines of *Enuma Elish*. More recently, Simo Parpola has argued that the origins of many aspects of Greek philosophy lie in ancient Near Eastern (specifically Assyrian) religion and mythology (Parpola 1993:161-208).

However, there is more; various other types of what may be called ancient Near Eastern “philosophy” are currently attested. According to Griffith-

Dickson (2009:148), there has been a questioning of the ideological grounds on which what is philosophically interesting has been decided in the past:

Religions that place their gods within creation are usually given short shrift within the realms of philosophy. They may be seen as primitive, superseded or supplanted by later religious developments, as in Greece, or subject to conversion by missionary activity, if not yet, then they should be soon. Where they remain, they may be known tactfully as 'indigenous religion' – perhaps implying that anyone not born into it couldn't possibly believe in it. Thus they are not usually treated as religious-philosophical systems whose beliefs merit *philosophical*, as opposed to anthropological investigation.

This scenario is now changing among scholars of religion choosing to adopt a philosophical as opposed to purely historical, comparative or sociological approach to their subject. In this regard, several area studies philosophy in research on the ancient Near East are now commonplace.

Firstly, there is so-called "Babylonian philosophy", a folk-philosophy commonly traced back to early Mesopotamian wisdom literature. It is embodied in certain philosophies of life, particularly ethics as these are implicit in a variety of Babylonian literature in the forms of dialectic, dialogs, epic poetry, folklore, hymns, lyrics, prose, and proverbs. Its concerns were not as limited as they are today but extend to the natural folk-philosophy that would later become scientific inquiry. What is more, historians of ancient philosophy know that Babylonian philosophy had an influence on Greek philosophy. *The dialog of pessimism*, well known to many scholars of the Hebrew Bible, contains similarities to the agonistic thought of the sophists, the Heraclitean doctrine of contrasts, and the dialogs of Plato, as well as a precursor to the Socratic Method. The father of philosophy himself, Thales, was a Phoenician who had once studied in Babylonia (see Horstmanshoff, Stol & Tilburg 2004).

A second example of ancient Near Eastern folk philosophy is so-called "Egyptian philosophy". Egyptologists have not shied away from discussing what they believe to be philosophical issues in ancient Egyptian religion. This goes far beyond the New Age fascination with ancient Egypt, as when in 1989 the proceedings of a seminar hosted by the Department of Near Eastern

Languages and Civilizations at the Graduate School of Yale University were published in a work entitled *Religion and philosophy in ancient Egypt*. This work was considered philosophical as it arose from philosophical interests, as is evident in the titles of some of the essays, e.g., *The cosmology of the Pyramid Texts* (James P. Allen); *State and religion in the New Kingdom* (Jan Assmann); *The natural philosophy of Akhenaten* (James P. Allen); etc. (see Allen 1989).

On a more intensified level, a descriptive philosophical approach to Egyptian religion and mythology is found in the work of someone like one of the more familiar Egyptologists to scholars of ancient Israelite religion, i.e., Jan Assmann. Assmann has at times engaged in what can only be described as comparative philosophy of religion. He sees no problem in using the concept of “philosophy” with reference to some of the religious beliefs in ancient Egyptian culture. Recently, in his *The price of monotheism* (2009), Assmann did not consider it a category mistake to suggest that ancient Israelite religion (Moses of the Hebrew Bible) introduced the true-false *philosophical* distinction in a permanent and revolutionary form. He also compared the moral *philosophy* of pagan (Egypt) with what he calls the *philosophy* of justice in the Hebrew Bible. Whether or not one is convinced by the details of Assmann’s arguments, his philosophical account of Egyptian and biblical ideas provides a useful analogy for imagining the presence of philosophical notions in ancient Israelite religion. For an attempted critique of Assmann from biblical scholarship, see Otto (2006:105) and Smith (2008:323-327).

Thirdly, there is “Persian philosophy”, a phenomenon traced back as far as Old Iranian philosophical traditions and thoughts with ancient Indo-Iranian roots. The tradition of philosophy in the Persian-speaking world is extraordinarily rich, creative and diverse. A recent anthology was completely dedicated to its historical-philosophical clarification (Nasr & Razavi 2008). The term “philosophy” is used here in its widest sense to include implicit critical theological reasoning and extending over a period of more than two millennia. It comes in many forms and during the pre-Islamic period was intertwined with religion in texts like the *Gathas*, the *Denkard*, and the Zoroastrian texts of the *Bundahisn*. The dominant philosophical concerns include metaphysics, cosmology and eschatology.

Much of Persian philosophy is typically associated with the teachings of

Zarathustra (Zoroaster) who offered some of the earliest known folk-philosophical treatments of the problem of evil. The ideas stemming from this tradition would later have a significant influence on Greek philosophy, some exponents of which (e.g. Eudoxus of Cnidus) believed Persian (Zoroastrian) thought to be the most famous and useful of all philosophies. As most biblical scholars know, moreover, many elements of Persian philosophy are now indelible in western folk-philosophy, and then not only because of its influence on Israelite religion in the post-exilic period (Albertz 1994:417).

Yet Persian philosophy also influenced Greek philosophy. For example, Plato himself learnt Zoroastrian philosophy and incorporated much of it into his own Platonic realism. His writings in the *Republic* were even accused of plagiarizing parts of Zoroaster's *On nature*, such as the *Myth of Er*. Another interesting example is the ways in which Zarathustra's ideas were communicated via the Persian philosopher Othanes to his most famous student, the Greek philosopher Democritus, the man famous for having invented the idea of the "atom". Not surprisingly then, in 2005, the *Oxford dictionary of philosophy* ranked Zarathustra's legacy as number two in the chronology of philosophical events (see Livingstone 2002:144-147).

Taken together, these brief remarks on ancient Near Eastern philosophy provide an analogy for the idea of philosophy in ancient Israelite religion that is closer to home to the cultural contexts in which the Hebrew Bible arose. If one can speak of Babylonian, Egyptian and Persian "philosophy", there is no reason why the notion of ancient Israelite "philosophy" cannot be introduced in a folk-philosophical manner. It too will concern the metaphysical, epistemological, moral and other assumptions implicit in the Hebrew Bible's myths, legends, proverbs and songs.

African philosophy⁵

Another quite interesting possible analogy to the controversy of speaking of philosophy in ancient Israelite religion comes to us in the form of African

⁵ The idea of an analogy between my concept of a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion and a previous generation of African philosophy was suggested to me by the South African philosopher, Ernst Wolff. After finishing the section, I stumbled on a related but still different idea in Perdue (2005:319-329).

philosophy. It is nowadays a recognized field in philosophy proper, although given many differences from Western philosophy, the very idea of African philosophy – like the idea of Israelite philosophy – is itself an essentially contested concept. A lot of debate has concerned itself with the question of whether there is such a thing as African “philosophy” at all and, if there is, what its nature and contents are supposed to be.

The debate was sparked after a Belgian missionary, Father Placide Tempels, published the first work in this genre, *La Philosophie Bantu* (1945; English 1959). Tempels was reacting to a prevailing belief about Africans, argued in earlier works by anthropologists such as Lucien Levi-Bruhl (and by the Catholic Church) that Africans were incapable of philosophical thought, and hence were less than human. Tempels, by contrast, argued that the people of Sub-Saharan Africa do have a distinctive philosophy and he attempted to describe its underpinnings.

In his writings, Tempels argued that the African philosophical categories can be identified through the categories inherent to language and that the primary ontological category in African metaphysics is “Force”. While Tempels’ work may be seen as the starting point for the academic study of African philosophy, questions of African identity began long before his work. This debate regarding the nature and existence of African philosophy has culminated in two camps, the universalists and the particularists (see Ikuenobe 1997:189-190). The former argued that the conceptual content of “philosophy” should be the same in both the Western and African contexts while the latter held that different cultures have different ways of explaining reality; hence, Africans will have a philosophy that is essentially different from other philosophies. A third view argued for a combination of universalist and particularist elements in African philosophy in the sense that although there are culturally determined philosophical ways of constructing meaning, these ways are not necessarily always incommensurable. As a result of these debates, there developed what Henry Orika (1981:1-7) famously discerned as four (later as six) trends in African philosophy, three of which are particularly relevant as analogy for imagining a philosophical approach to the Hebrew Bible.

The first is so-called *ethno-philosophy*, a quite useful analogy for the notion of a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion. It involves the

recording of the folk-philosophical beliefs found in African cultures (although the concept has also popularly been used in the context of Japanese philosophy; see Okafor 1997:363-381). This line of thinking treats African philosophy as consisting of a set of shared beliefs, values, categories, and assumptions that are implicit in the language, practices, and beliefs of African cultures. Leopold Senghor's concept of "Negritude" that suggested the distinctly African approach to reality was based on emotion, participation and art rather than logic, analysis and science is one example of ethno-philosophy. It is quite reminiscent of a related debate on the concept of "Hebrew thought" in the days of the biblical theology movement which opposed Hebraic mentalities to what was alleged to be foreign, Greek and philosophical. More examples of ethno-philosophy include the writings of Tempels, Kagame and Mbiti (who, for example, argued for an "African" concept of time).

Secondly, there is so-called *philosophical sagacity*, which is also a possible analogy for philosophical thought in ancient Israel, albeit different from ethno-philosophy. It represents an individualist version of ethno-philosophy, which pertains to the beliefs of certain special members of a community. These include the thoughts of sages, some of which may not be philosophical in the strict sense yet which constitute raw data for technical philosophical reflections by professional or trained philosophers. Someone like Odera Oruka used the concept of sagacity to point out that there is and was indeed a *philosophy* implicit in the discourses of sages of Africa in the fullest sense of the word, one that concerned itself with daily problems and issues common to every human being, e.g., the existence of deity, life, knowledge, death etc. Such issues were usually best addressed by the sages who could to some extent "transcend" the communal way of thinking.

As Janz (2004:8-9) points out, toward the end of his career Oruka added two more trends to his original four, one of which is the third relevant approach, the so-called *hermeneutic philosophy* (also called historical-hermeneutic) which consists of the philosophical analysis of African languages for the sake of finding and clarifying philosophically relevant content implicit therein. Also associated with analytic Anglophone approaches, it is associated with the work of scholars such as Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo. The term "hermeneutic" has been used by a number of other philosophers to mean something closer to the

contemporary European sense – the philosophy of interpretation, in an African context.

As Janz (2004:12) goes on to remark, amidst these perspectives, not all of which are incommensurable, the perennial issue of the origin and foundation of African philosophy takes several forms:

First, it is a question about sources. Are there texts, and what counts as a text? Do cultural forms such as proverbs, songs, tales, and other forms of oral tradition count as philosophy in themselves, or are they merely the potential objects of philosophical analysis? Does the wisdom of sages count as philosophy, or is that wisdom at best merely the object of philosophical analysis? Is African philosophy African because it draws on tradition in some way? To take another line of inquiry, if we think of African philosophy as a discipline, where does disciplinarity come from, and what is its justification? Is African philosophy really a form of anthropology? Does it have more in common with literature, religion, or politics than with Western philosophy?

Here we can look at the task of the descriptive and historical philosopher of ancient Israelite religion as comparable to an African philosopher working in the analytic tradition, e.g., Barry Hallen (1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2006). Oruka first assigned Hallen to the hermeneutic approach. Hallen acknowledged that the question might be asked whether it is appropriate to use alien methods, using technical words and meanings that are foreign to African languages to analyze and clarify its concepts. He answers it by way of a thesis from ordinary language philosophy, which holds that a philosophical analysis of non-philosophical discourse is valid in case of: a) an emphasis upon *ordinary*, *common* and *collective uses* of language and b) the opting for philosophical *description* rather than critique. Thus according to Fasiku (2008:9):

The ‘formal’ or ‘universalists’ conception of philosophy, in which philosophy is construed ‘as a systematic, rigorous, universal, and rational discipline’ of conceptual analysis, criticisms which show evidence of the paradigms of philosophy. What Barry Hallen

advocates is that while these features of philosophy are, though acceptable, they are not final. Philosophy would still accommodate description and analysis of beliefs, thoughts and tradition.

Moreover, Fasiku (2008:9) continues:

There need be no presumption that this kind of study will either solve or dissolve the traditional problems of philosophy' ... It is not important that the method of ordinary language philosophy is able to solve problems.

In his *African philosophy – an analytic approach*, Hallen (2006:121) argues that both the philosopher and the anthropologist should play complementary roles in the attempt to understand non-Western cultures; the role should not be left only to the anthropologist. The philosopher, because of his or her interests and training, definitely has a role to play. However, he warns that the philosopher in his or her endeavours “must take care not to distort the non-Western view by unfairly reducing it to a theoretical alternative already developed by, for example, Western philosophy” (Hallen 2006:121).

Whether or not Hallen is doing African philosophy as many think it should be done is, however, for the present, beside the point. I simply note Hallen's approach of the philosophical analysis of African thought as an analogy of how a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion might be conducted by the biblical scholar who is solely interested in the clarification of meaning of what is stereotypically thought to be non-philosophical cultural conceptual content.

My second example of an African philosopher of religion (specifically) whose work contains research that might represent a plausible analogy for this kind of discussion that a philosopher of ancient Israelite religion working descriptively and comparatively could be doing is Kwasi Wiredu. In a few papers, Wiredu attempted to clarify African conceptions of the divine in philosophical terms and compared this with western philosophical conceptions of God to show fundamental metaphysical differences (Wiredu 1992:41). One particularly relevant example is his writing entitled “African religions from a philosophical point of view” (Wiredu 1999:34-55) which appeared in a textbook in comparative philosophy of religion (Quinn & Taliaferro 1999 [2010]). On the whole, Wiredu is sensitive not to be tempted to be prone to generalization and

systematizing of ideas into one unitary “African” perspective. Pluralism is to be admitted and assimilated and there is no need to harmonize incommensurable conceptual diversity. One simply works with smaller historical and cultural complexes and can show by way of philosophical analysis even further differences of nuance and diachronic change within traditions. As with Hallen, whether Wiredu is doing African philosophy as it should be done is beside the point.

In the end, biblical scholars debating the existence, nature and understanding of any folk-philosophy in ancient Israelite religion would do well to learn from debates in African philosophy regarding this matter. A look at how this is done in a work such as *Philosophy from Africa – a text with readings* (Coetzee & Roux 2002) might be worth the biblical scholar’s while to see what can be done. Ultimately, then, remarks such as the following tease out possibilities for finding philosophy in Yahwism. In Lelele (2002:86) we read a quote, the significance of which becomes clear if we are allowed to substitute “ancient Israelite” and “Hebrew” for “Diola” and “Sengalese”:

It may be ... that there is no Diola philosophy in the rigorous sense understood by Western thought, because the Senegalese peasant hardly reflects exhaustively on being, on the value or conditions of action and has great difficulty in dealing with abstraction or logical dialectics. But if, by philosophy, one means the original synthesis of knowledge, an attitude vis-à-vis the world and life’s problems, even if the elaboration is only implicit, rather confusedly felt than a clearly expressed cosmology, there unquestionably exists a Diola philosophy inscribed not only in dogma, myth, rites and symbols, proverbs and enigmas, songs and dances but also in the banal, daily gesture of the rice grower or the millet grinder, in the organization of the habitat or the curious division [découpage] of the paddy fields.

One might say the same about Israelite “philosophy”. In the end, I use this example not to argue for the existence of Western critical scholastic or analytic philosophy in ancient Israel. What I do wish to ask is whether many biblical scholars’ anti-philosophical sentiment in the name of theological or historical-hermeneutical consciousness might not in the end boil down to little more than

an unwitting instance of Western colonialist reasoning that denies the existence of everything not created in its own image. Were the vehement denials of philosophy in ancient Israelite religion then little more than yet another unwitting instance of “Western colonial bias” that could not accept the texts on their own terms? Perhaps the analogy with African philosophy suggests it is time for a post-colonial reevaluation of the whole debate on the relation between philosophy and Yahwistic religion.

Philosophy in literature

The presence of folk philosophy in the Hebrew Bible can also be demonstrated with reference to the analogy of philosophy *in* literature (a notion that is distinct from the concept of philosophy *of* literature with which biblical scholars as literary critics will be more familiar). Philosophy is not only present in the writings of philosophers, as theology is not only limited to the thoughts of theologians proper. As Frank, Leaman & Manekin (2000:3) observe in their discussion of Jewish philosophy, not only what philosophy is about but also the form in which it is expressed is best approached from a non-essentialist perspective:

Philosophy expresses itself in a variety of written forms. One thinks of Plato’s dialogues, Aristotle’s treatises, Augustine and Rousseau’s Confessions, Descartes and Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations, Heraclitus and Nietzsche’s aphorisms.

Can some sort of folk-philosophy then be found implicit in ancient Israelite prose and poetry? Why not? While much Western philosophy attempts to establish its claims through argumentation that is more rigorous than appeals to experience, differences in the way philosophy is conceived may reflect differences in the interests philosophy is meant to satisfy. For example, through the centuries, a number of poets have written poems on philosophical themes, and some important philosophers have expressed their philosophy in verse. As the Wikipedia (2010) entry on *Philosophy and literature* states:

The cosmogony of Hesiod and the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius are important philosophical poems. The genre of epic poetry was also used to teach philosophy. Vyasa narrated the ancient Indian

epic *Mahabharata* in order to teach Indian philosophy and Hindu philosophy. Homer also presented some philosophical teachings in his *Odyssey*. Some philosophers have undertaken to write philosophy in the form of fiction, including novels and short stories. In doing so, they have resorted to narrative to get their teachings across. The classical 12th century Islamic philosopher, Abubacer (Ibn Tufail), wrote a fictional Arabic narrative *Philosophus Autodidactus* as a response to al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, and then the 13th century Islamic theologian-philosopher Ibn al-Nafis also wrote a fictional narrative *Theologus Autodidactus* as a response to Abubacer's *Philosophus Autodidactus*. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche often articulated his ideas in literary modes, most notably in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a re-imagined account of the teachings of Zoroaster. George Santayana was also a philosopher who wrote novels and poetry; the relationship between Santayana's characters and his beliefs is more complex. The existentialists include among their numbers important French authors who used fiction to convey their philosophical views; these include Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* and play *No Exit*, and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. The classical 12th century Islamic philosopher, Abubacer (Ibn Tufail), wrote a fictional Arabic narrative *Philosophus Autodidactus* as a response to al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, and then the 13th century Islamic theologian-philosopher Ibn al-Nafis also wrote a fictional narrative *Theologus Autodidactus* as a response to Abubacer's *Philosophus Autodidactus*.

To be sure, the Hebrew Bible might not have been intended as a text communicating what many people nowadays understand by the term "philosophy". That is because in the context of the Hebrew Bible what people nowadays think is anachronistic! The fact is that biblical literature cannot but contain taken-for-granted folk-philosophies of religion embodied in the religious language of its prose and poetry. It is there, just as much as theology is both absent and present in ancient Israelite religion. Fretheim (1984:24-25), for example, has shown the possibility of generalizing a theology from a story

which *a fortiori* implies the possibility of extracting philosophical assumptions. The stories about the patriarchs or about Saul and David surely contain many hidden moral philosophical notions that can only be discerned by extracting these from the narratives in which they lie nascent. We may not find them congenial but they are there nevertheless. Thomas Thompson thought as much in his introduction to general Israelite historiography where he remarks on the trouble of confusing stories with historical evidence. Thompson (1999:99) realizes that the ways in which the narrators of the Hebrew Bible go about reflecting on the past should not be equated with modern notions of history:

The Bible's language is not an historical language. It is a language of high literature, of story, of sermon and of song. It is a tool of philosophy and moral instruction.

Later on, Thompson (1999:288) gets more specific when he suggests that:

Much like the poet of Deuteronomy 32, who sends his audience to the past for his teaching, Aristotle creates a philosophical past to ground the fundamental elements of his philosophy.

This is one way of saying it, but even if the Hebrew Bible was not intended as a lesson in philosophy, it cannot but contain folk-philosophy. Our final illustration of this fact that also shows how a philosophical approach is perfectly possible comes from discussions of philosophy in popular culture (e.g., films). Perhaps the film that has invited the most philosophical explication is the science fiction cult film *The Matrix* (1999). Several books are now available that discuss the philosophical assumptions and problems implicit in the narrative of the trilogy. An example of this would be *The Matrix and philosophy: welcome to the desert of the real* (Irwin 2002). Others include Matt Lawrence's *Like a splinter in your mind: the philosophy behind The Matrix trilogy* (2004) and Christopher Grau's *Philosophers explore The Matrix* (2005). Philosophical accounts of the film seek to familiarize readers with key issues in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, race and gender, existentialism, Taoism and mysticism *implicit* in the fictional narrative.

To be sure, the authors of *The Matrix* script had philosophical backgrounds and intentionally worked explicit allusions to philosophical problems into the fictional narrative. Yet while I have chosen *The Matrix* in view of its popularity,

other less overtly philosophical scripts in the “Popular Culture and Philosophy Series” have also been explored for their philosophical assumptions, including *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *Harry Potter*, and *Lord of the rings*, *Star wars* and even *James Bond*, *Baseball* and Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*. As to the concept of philosophy in popular culture, the editor (Irwin 2010) of the series had the following to say:

Since its inception in 2000, Open Court’s Popular Culture and Philosophy® series has brought high-quality philosophy to general readers. The volumes present essays by academic philosophers exploring the meanings, concepts, and puzzles within television shows, movies, music and other icons of popular culture ... most PCP volumes are not about entire genres in popular culture. They focus on specific television programs, hit movies, books, video games or trends. Proposals for titles such as “Video Games and Philosophy” or “Action Movies and Philosophy” are much less appealing than (for example) “Grand Theft Auto . . .” or “Kill Bill and Philosophy.” While many items in popular culture have identifiable philosophical content, that does not guarantee that “X and philosophy” will appeal to fans. (By X, I mean the topic in question, not the highly underrated Los Angeles punk band of the 1980s!) In many cases, fans would probably rather re-watch the movie or re-read the book than open a book of scholarly essays about it. But when most fans think the movie or rock band in question is misunderstood or underappreciated, PCP volumes are just the thing – especially when the philosophers writing about the concepts and arguments in question are fans themselves.

If philosophical discussions of these are possible given the presence of Western folk-philosophical assumptions underlying the discourse in question, there is no reason why such a philosophical commentary on the Hebrew Bible *qua* folk-philosophical script(s) is out of place. Can we actually dare to imagine titles such as Abraham and philosophy, Moses and philosophy, David and philosophy, Jeremiah and philosophy; or Genesis and philosophy, Leviticus and philosophy, Judges and philosophy or Daniel and philosophy? Why not?

Philosophical approaches to myth

Our final analogy from philosophy to enable us to conceive of the presence of folk-philosophy in the Hebrew Bible and imagine the possibility of a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion comes to us in the form of philosophical approaches in the study of mythology. While the ancient distinction between *mythos* and *logos* is still maintained in biblical theology to the extent that it considers philosophy and religion distinct categories operating with different criteria of rationality, philosophers have both used and analyzed myth as part of their doing philosophy. Plato himself thought that myth could express and did contain implicit philosophical truths. Philosophers of religion since Hegel to the phenomenologist of religion Nathan Söderblom believed that one could write a philosophy of religion on the basis of the history of religion and argued that the animistic ideas that lie at the origin of the dark side of Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible represent primitive “philosophy” in the above sense (Otto 1968:74). So contrary to popular belief, applying philosophy to myth does not necessarily involve a category mistake.

Within biblical interpretation itself, philosophical approaches to myth are best known in the form of existential/existentialist biblical interpretation (Soulén & Soulén 2001:57). It is mostly associated with New Testament scholarship and with the hermeneutics of Bultmann based on Heidegger’s philosophy. According to the popular distinction, philosophy speaks on the level of ontology while the Bible offers an ontic perspective. However, Bultmann recognized that any ontic interpretation of human existence presupposes a generally hidden ground in ontology. On this program, one can only understand the ontic aspects in the biblical text if one can first consider the ontological-existentialist structures of human being in general with the aid of philosophy. Interestingly, Hebrew Bible scholarship has shown less of an interest in this approach than have scholars studying the New Testament (DiLella 1985:49-55).

But there is much more than Bultmann-type existentialist perspectives as far as philosophical approaches to the study of mythology are concerned and we have seen the proliferation of philosophical approaches to myth in the twentieth century. Particularly notable here as illustration is the second part of Ernst Cassirer’s (1955) *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. As Friedman

(2008:1) recounts, characteristic of Cassirer's philosophy of mythology is his concern for the more "primitive" forms of world-presentation – a concern for the ordinary perceptual awareness of the world expressed primarily in natural language, and, above all, for the mythical view of the world lying at the most primitive level of all.

Friedman (2008:1) also notes that for Cassirer, religious language harbours an expressive (emotive) rather than descriptive (referential) folk-philosophy. According to Cassirer, this type of meaning underlies mythical consciousness. It also explains its most distinctive feature, the absence of any Platonic distinction between appearance and reality. Since the mythical world does not consist of stable and enduring substances that manifest themselves from various points of view and on various occasions, it also exemplifies its own particular type of causality.

A second illustration of a philosophical approach to myth (and vice-versa) comes to us in a book entitled *Philosophy in a new key: a study in the symbolism of reason, rite and art*. This is the main work of American philosopher Susanne K. Langer (1942). In it she declared that "Symbolism was the 'new key' to understanding how the human mind transformed the primal need to express oneself". Langer (1942:x) wrote:

The process of philosophical thought moves typically from a first, inadequate, but ardent apprehension of some novel idea, figuratively expressed, to more and more precise comprehension, until language catches up to logical insight, the figure is dispensed with, and literal expression takes its place. Really new concepts, having no names in current language, always make their earliest appearance in metaphorical statements; therefore the beginning of any theoretical structure is inevitably marked by fantastic inventions. There is an air of such metaphor, or "philosophical myth," in the treatment of musical "meaning," which I think I could improve on were I given another fling at it today.

Ordinarily, the conventional wisdom of the day relegated myth to the non-philosophical side of man. Rudolph Carnap, for example, had held that poetry was merely an emotional catharsis of the poet aiming at the stimulation of the percipient's immediate emotion. But contrary to such positivist views, Langer

vindicated the properly intellectual character of the non-discursive “presentational” symbols of myth (Liddy 1971:94-110). Under the influence of the neo-Kantian, Ernst Cassirer, Langer (1942:177) pointed in particular to the highly “formal” character of non-philosophical literature and Langer’s philosophical theory of myth as she presents it in *Philosophy in a new key* looks with approval at E. Bethe’s remarks on the function of myth: “Myth is primitive philosophy, the simplest presentational (anschauliche) form of thought, a series of attempts to understand the world, to explain life and death, fate and nature, gods and cults.”

One commonality between myth and stereotypical philosophy is the distinction between appearance and reality. Plato and most of Western philosophy’s dualist metaphysics is to a large extent an adaptation of the religious distinction between the sacred and the profane realms (Cupitt 2001:14). In addition, a literal interest in ultimate issues lies at the origin of the discursive, distinguishing, differentiated thought of early philosophy. Prior to that, myths, symbolic images and stories, were indeed the only material capable of symbolizing one’s fundamental orientation in the universe. There is the “breaking” of the myth in the early philosophers’ distinction between the myth and its meaning and their various attempts to develop clearly and literally that ultimate meaning of life and the universe. Philosophy knows, however, that myth as serious symbol begins to wane as soon as the literal question of its factual content is raised and distinctions begin to be made (Langer 1942:202). On this view too, philosophical reflection on myth has the task of description and clarification, rather than evaluation and critique.

Another example of the philosophical study of myth is the essay *Myth and philosophy from the presocratics to Plato* by Kathryn A Morgan (2000). The author is not interested in providing a philosophical account of myth or in a philosophical theory to explain what myth really is. Rather, it is as a discussion of how myth functioned in the thought of early Greek philosophers themselves. Much of the reception of Greek philosophy stigmatized myth as ‘irrational’. Such an approach ignores the important role played by myth in Greek philosophy, not just as a foil, but also as a mode of *philosophical* thought. The case studies in this book reveal myth deployed as a result of methodological reflection, and as a manifestation of *philosophical* concerns.

In mythological criticism proper, a recent publication entitled *Thinking through myths* offers philosophical reflections on myths (Schilbrack 2002). It brings together essays that use the philosophical tools – including phenomenology, metaphysics, semiotics and moral philosophy – to study these worlds and to think through myths. Philosophical approaches to mythology are assumed to focus on investigating the cognitive dimension of myths. One asks what it might mean to say that myths are rational, in what sense myths are a permanent feature of our culture and what happens when the idea is rejected that myths belong to a previous primitive stage.

In the book, Robert Segal (2002:18-45) discusses Edward Taylor's conception of myth as primitive philosophy and also gives other views of the relationship between myth and philosophy from Frazer to Popper, Bultmann and Jonas. Hebrew Bible scholars might take note of M. Scarborough's comparative phenomenological analysis of Genesis 1:1-2:4 and Plato's *Timaeus* (2002:46-64). His interpretation of myths focuses on the kind of being-in-the-world that they disclose. On the basis of the existential turn of phenomenology he shows that myths use pre-reflective, operative intentionality in their description of aspects of the lived world. A publication such as *Thinking through myths* thus provides an example of the philosophical study of myths from the perspectives of Anglo-Saxon philosophy.

The bottom line of this section on philosophical approaches to myth is that myth and philosophy can and do mix and that the popular attempt to divorce the two in the context of biblical theology is an anomaly in the academia that otherwise has no such qualms or hermeneutical problems with asking philosophical questions concerning mythological discourse. In view of the possibility of philosophical reflection on mythology and the use of myth in philosophy, we may now be able to conceive of the relation between myth in the Hebrew Bible and philosophy in the same way. We can learn from the ways in which mythology have been looked at via philosophical perspectives as these offer us a precedent for why and how this can be done in the context of biblical studies where the presence of myth in ancient Israelite religion is all too often used as an excuse to avoid philosophical reflection.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of these analogies, it may be said that one can now speak of philosophical data in the Hebrew Bible. The analogies show that the philosophy in the text lies covert on the level of folk-philosophical assumptions about the nature of existence, reality, knowledge, truth, belief, morality and reasoning. In view of this it is arguably the case that unless we make a deliberate attempt to take time and reconstruct these folk-philosophical assumptions we have not begun to grasp the most fundamental and elementary constituents of biblical worldviews. Failing to do therefore hardly prevents philosophical distortion and in fact keeps us prone to reading our own anachronistic philosophical assumptions into the biblical discourse. Seen from this perspective, a philosophical approach is part of a literary-historical reading and not something in opposition to it.

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