

# THE HEBREW BIBLE AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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THE HEBREW BIBLE AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

*By*  
Jaco Gericke

Society of Biblical Literature  
Atlanta

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## PREFACE

I'm searching for the philosopher's stone  
And it's a hard road,  
It's a hard road daddy-o  
When my job is turning lead into gold.<sup>1</sup>

When the young Friedrich Nietzsche's first book (*The Birth of Tragedy*) came out, it appeared to merit only one review. According to the critic who penned it, anyone who wrote a work of that sort was finished as a scholar. The book was subsequently rejected by Nietzsche's peers and only served to distance him from the academic establishment of the time. One reason for the work's bad reception was the fact that it undermined the traditional division between philosophical discourse and artistic expression so dear to western folk philosophy. Because Nietzsche's philosophical contribution to philology would not fit into the neat categories into which the academic discussions of his day were separated, he was a "problem philosopher" for many of his colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

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1. From *The Philosopher's Stone* by Van Morrison. In the context of this foreword, I use the motif to symbolize a mad scientist seeking to achieve academic immortality with a Great Work that involves turning nonphilosophical biblical texts into a philosophy of Israelite religion. I have to say at the outset that I have no problem having recourse to Wikipedia entries, even though my doing so will scandalize many of my peers. In academic circles, Wikipedia has the reputation of being too superficial or unreliable for research purposes. As I see it, however, Wikipedia entries should be judged on their individual merit. While there are many entries in the field of theology that are patently filled with fundamentalist pseudoscholarship, there are also those that offer useful summaries of ideas otherwise difficult to explain to biblical scholars with little philosophical background. Furthermore, by making use of that resource I am making a statement about the supermodernist transgression this study represents.

2. See Laurence Gane and Kitty Chan, *Introducing Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999), 12.

This book has the potential to become Hebrew Bible scholarship's equivalent of Nietzsche's attempt to think beyond the established categories. Very few biblical scholars are ready to imagine an independent philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion, one supplementing already extant interpretative methodologies. Even worse, biblical studies tends to be one of those fields where the discrediting of popular sentiments, rather than being welcomed as a sign of scientific progress, is dreaded as a possible precursor to a personal existential disaster. Perhaps, then, a tongue-in-cheek warning is required: readers who are comfortable in the belief that philosophical concerns, categories and concepts are the enemies of the biblical scholar may be in danger of being awakened from one of the oldest dogmatic slumbers in the business.

In the pages to follow I hope to demonstrate that certain types of descriptive varieties of philosophy of religion exist that are capable of aiding the clarification of meaning in the Hebrew Bible. Obviously, not everything written here is completely novel. Besides involving bits and pieces of ideas of many others before me, this study represents a continuation and marked revision of a chapter of methodological musings first put forward in my Ph.D. dissertation written during the period 2002–2003.<sup>3</sup> There I proposed the utilization of philosophy of religion as an auxiliary discipline in Hebrew Bible Studies. At the time I was staggering from a loss of faith from which I never recovered. My concerns were therefore largely evaluative and critical, that is, atheological.

However, readers familiar with stereotypical analytic philosophy of religion and hoping either for an attempted justification of biblical truth claims or seeking an atheological critique of ancient Yahwism are advised to turn elsewhere. The present work is motivated by a need for understanding and elucidation of the worlds in the text despite my essentially postrealist (i.e., atheist) interpretative paradigm. So while some readers will insist that it is impossible to come up with a theologically interesting and hermeneutically legitimate nonrealist and descriptive perspective on the Hebrew Bible, I believe I have done it. What the reader will encounter in the pages to follow is something unlike anything currently typical of mainstream biblical scholarship. To my mind it represents a pioneering

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3. Jacobus W. Gericke, "Does Yahweh Exist? A Philosophical-Critical Reconstruction of the Case against Realism in Old Testament Theology" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pretoria, 2004), 10–25.



endeavor that has the potential of becoming the latest new form of interdisciplinary biblical scholarship.

Though my personal obsession is the possible role of and interest in the Hebrew Bible in a readerly context outside of faith-based scholarship (a topic debated on the *SBL Forum*), this study will enable biblical scholars of all persuasions to access levels of meaning that lie beyond the scope of linguistic, literary, historical and social-scientific perspectives on the text. It even opens up new avenues for more objective theological thinking, since I have no desire to make the text into an object of scorn, as is the case with the New Atheist hermeneutic (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, etc.). It is not a call for the end of biblical studies (Hector Avalos) but for the beginning of a new era therein, one in which both believer and skeptic can together read the ancient texts from a perspective as relatively neutral as that found in the study of any other ancient culture such as that of the Greeks.

If favorably received, this study therefore has the potential to revolutionize the way we think about ancient Israelite religion. Indeed, perhaps only die-hard biblical theologians of the older generation of biblical theology enthusiasts will be able to really appreciate the mind shift its central concern represents. The target reader, however, is the new generation, twenty-first-century biblical scholar with philosophical interests, unhampered by the hermeneutical and ideological baggage of the past. Both theistic and atheistic readers will find something to chew on and discover why philosophy bashing in biblical scholarship, I am sorry to say, now has to be considered as having been “so twentieth century.”

In conclusion, I believe that, like life itself, biblical scholarship is but a game. This does not mean that one cannot take it very seriously. Yet for me the challenge is not winning, but figuring out how to make it more interesting than ever before. Of course, if the history of interpretation has taught us anything, it is that all our profound ideas are destined to become chaff in the wind. So rather than search for final answers, this study intends to initiate the quest for ultimate questions. In the end, it does not really matter which way the wind blows; and there is also no reason why one cannot learn to ride on its wings, like a god who is meditating, or wandering away, or on a journey, or perhaps asleep and in need of being awakened.

Jaco Gericke  
Pretoria, December 2011

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The writings of both biblical scholars and philosophers of religion have played a role in the development of my thoughts. Ghost mentors include biblical scholars such as James Barr, James Crenshaw, Robert Carroll, David Clines, and Rolf Knierim. In philosophy of religion, the thoughts of Don Cupitt and Keith Ward have greatly motivated my own endeavors. Many other scholars from a variety of fields have at one time or another influenced my thinking on issues addressed in this study and to all of them I am extremely grateful.

As for people closer to home, I would like to thank my colleague at the Vaal Campus of North-West University, Professor Hans van Deventer. Without him, I would simply have been deprived of the opportunity to undertake this study. Other supportive coconspirators include professors Dirk Human, Jurie Le Roux, Hendrik Bosman, and Dr. Christo Lombaard.

I am also very grateful to two wonderful women, Marlize and Charlotte, who each in her own way and time supported me kindly under the most complicated of circumstances.

Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Isabelle Delvare for the proofreading of the manuscript. Many thanks also to Susan Ackerman, Bob Buller, and the SBL copyediting team for their painstaking and extended assistance in removing many shortcomings in the manuscript

I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to the editors of the *Journal for Semitics*, *Old Testament Essays*, *Verbum et Ecclesia*, *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, and *Scriptura* for permission to utilize selections from previously published articles in sections of this book

Without all of you, none of this would be possible. Well, technically it might still be possible, but it would not have been easy. Not that it was actually easy, but you know what I mean. I hope.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AD</i>	<i>Ars Disputandi</i>
APA	American Philosophical Association
BCP	Blackwell Companions to Philosophy
BCR	Blackwell Companions to Religion
BRMT	Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>DDD</i>	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HCPR	Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>HTS</i>	<i>Hervormde Teologiese Studies</i>
<i>IEP</i>	<i>Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> . Edited by G. W. Bromiley. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979–1988.
<i>IJPR</i>	<i>Internet Journal for the Philosophy of Religion</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBT</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie</i>
<i>JFR</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie</i>
<i>JNABI</i>	<i>Journal of the National Association of Biblical Instructors</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal for Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JPS</i>	<i>Journal of Philosophy and Scripture</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSem</i>	<i>Journal for Semitics</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

LTT	Library of Theological Translations
NPNF	<i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.</i> Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 28 vols. in 2 series. 1886–1889.
NZSTR	<i>Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religions-philosophie</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
PEW	<i>Philosophy East and West</i>
RCIP	Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy
REP	<i>Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>
RelStud	<i>Religious Studies</i>
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SEP	<i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
So	<i>Sophia: International Journal for Philosophy of Religion</i>
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.</i> Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and David E. Green. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–.
ThWAT	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i>
ThZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
TW	Theologische Wissenschaft
UF	<i>Ugaritische Forschung</i>
VE	<i>Verbum et Ecclesia</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZAR	<i>Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

## PART 1

A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponent and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.\*

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\* Max K. Planck, *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers* (trans. Frank Gaynor; New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 33–34.



## A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO ANCIENT ISRAELITE RELIGION

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck him.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. THE PHILOSOPHICAL GAP IN HEBREW BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Interdisciplinary research in the study of the Hebrew Bible is nothing novel.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it is impossible to do any other kind. All forms of biblical criticism have recourse to at least one auxiliary subject, be it linguistics, literary criticism, history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology, philosophy, or another. In a pluralist hermeneutical context where different methodologies offer different insights, none of these auxiliary fields can lay claim to be *the* handmaid of biblical interpretation. All are equally useful aids in their own right, depending on what one wants to achieve in the reading of the text. The only essence in Hebrew Bible scholarship is thus not to be located in any particular approach to the text, but rather in the Hebrew Bible itself. (This is despite the well-known fact that the idea of a stable text is itself problematic.)

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. Gertrude E. M. Anscombe; New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), §129.

2. Some ideas expressed here were first expressed in Jaco Gericke, “The Quest for a Philosophical Yahweh (Part 1): Old Testament Studies and Philosophy of Religion,” *OTE* 18 (2006): 579–602.

Surveying the interpretative smorgasbord, the biblical scholar is confronted by an immense variety of reading strategies.<sup>3</sup> The extended family of biblical criticism include, *inter alia*, textual, source, tradition, redaction, form, historical, narrative, rhetorical, new, social-scientific, delimitation, feminist, ideological, canonical, psychological, mythological, composition, autobiographical and theological criticism. As for large scale approaches to the text, one can choose among biblical Hebrew linguistics, biblical geography, biblical archaeology, the history of Israel, the history of Israelite religion, comparative ancient Near Eastern studies, the sociology of Israelite religion, biblical theology, biblical ethics, biblical hermeneutics, cognitive perspectives, and so on.

From this overview, one might be tempted to conclude that Hebrew Bible scholars have at their disposal everything one could possibly need for the purposes of comprehensive and holistic research. In fact, one sometimes gets the impression that we have nearly exhausted possibilities for reading the text. All that is left is refinement, application, and keeping up to date with the latest trends in the auxiliary fields. Or so it seems. However, this conclusion is premature. From the perspective of religious studies proper, there is something seriously wrong with this picture. *Something is missing* as far as the multiplicity of approaches to ancient Israelite religion is concerned. For while we offer linguistic, literary, historical, theological, sociological, anthropological and psychological perspectives, there is to this day no officially recognized, independent and descriptive *philosophical* approach to the study of ancient Israelite religion.

### 1.2. THE INVOLVEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY IN HEBREW BIBLE STUDIES

To be sure, biblical scholars do make use of philosophy, in a number of ways:

1. For a long time in the history of biblical interpretation, philosophy was in fact the official handmaid of biblical commentary.
2. Every major era in biblical interpretation came about as a result of *philosophical* (especially epistemological) fashions that provided a hermeneutical justification for a particular

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3. For discussion of the methods, see Richard N. Soulen and Kendall R. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).



paradigm shift.<sup>4</sup> The epistemology of modernism lies behind the historical turn, while postmodern epistemologies provided the impetus for the creation and employment of a variety of socioliterary approaches.

3. A minimal acquaintance with ideas that have roots in philosophy is required when coming to terms with the theory underlying many forms of biblical criticism. Philosophy is always covertly present as something indelible and all forms of biblical criticism are only meaningful given a number of unspoken *philosophical* assumptions.<sup>5</sup>
4. Some fields in the study of the Hebrew Bible are by their very nature fundamentally linked to issues in related philosophical trends, e.g., biblical hermeneutics and biblical ethics.
5. Overviews of the history of biblical interpretation often note influential philosophical ideas in the makeup of notable biblical scholars. One cannot acquaint oneself with the history of biblical interpretation without becoming knowingly or unwittingly familiar with some of the popular assumptions in Platonism, Aristotelianism, rationalism, romanticism, idealism, historicism, personalism, positivism, Marxism, existentialism, postmodernism, and so on.
6. Biblical theologians have never really stopped worrying about the relation of philosophy to their subject. Even after the separation of biblical criticism and biblical theology from dogmatics, we find traces of dependence on ideas put forward by fashionable philosophers: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida, and so on.

A variety of philosophical subdisciplines are therefore indirectly still pulling some of the strings behind the scenes in research on the Hebrew Bible. Their influence is palpable, even in the writings of those scholars with no training in philosophy. Philosophical fields that are most clearly visible

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4. On the influential role of philosophy in American theology, see Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Philosophical Agenda* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996).

5. On the philosophical assumptions in those dismissive of philosophy, see James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 152.

include hermeneutics, ethics, philosophy of language, philosophy of literature, political philosophy, social philosophy and the philosophy of science. It was the recognition of this state of affairs that once prompted a rare retraction of earlier claims by none other than the late James Barr himself:

In this respect, incidentally, I should perhaps make an amendment to my remarks in *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, ch. 10, in which I pointed out how far Old Testament scholarship was remote from philosophy. The judgment should perhaps have a temporal qualifier attached to it: it certainly applies up to my own generation. Judging from the influential hermeneutical philosophies, and from some of what is now written in biblical studies, a kind of philosophy, especially social philosophy and what is coming to be called critical-theory, is becoming more obvious and central in biblical study. But this is for the most part a new thing, an innovation as against what has been normal since the mid-nineteenth century. It may certainly change the air of biblical study. Philosophical claims or claims of critical theory, disquisitions about poststructuralism, postmodernism and the like may take the place of what used to be called Hebrew Grammar or textual criticism. Derrida and Foucault will become more familiar than the Septuagint or Brown, Driver and Briggs. It certainly looks that way at the moment.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding these overt and covert excursions to things philosophical, there is something that still does not make sense and that needs to be examined more closely.

### 1.3. WHAT ABOUT PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION?

It seems rather odd that Hebrew Bible scholars—whose main concern is *religious* texts—have failed to make intensive and extensive use of the one philosophical discipline actually exclusively devoted to the study of *religious* phenomena, i.e. *philosophy of religion*. To be sure, one does encounter isolated allusions to philosophy of religion in the works of biblical scholars, that is, indirect references to philosophical debates on the nature of religious language, the problem of evil and religious epistemology. Even so, at present no dictionary or encyclopedia of biblical interpretation includes entries such as “*philosophical criticism*” or “*philosophy of Israelite*

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6. James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27–28.

*religion*.<sup>7</sup> No wonder even James Barr felt that the prospect for interdisciplinary research looked bleak:

It would be difficult to exaggerate the degree of alienation that the average biblical scholar has felt in relation to the work of disciplines like *philosophical theology* or *philosophy of religion*. Their modes of discussion and decision seem to him or her remote and unreal. The questions they discuss and the criteria they apply seem to be contrived and artificial, and the world of discourse in which they move seems to be quite a different world from the world of the Bible, to which the biblical scholar feels he has a sort of direct and empirical access.<sup>8</sup>

If this assessment is accurate, readers may be perplexed as to why anyone in their right mind would want to consider such an apparent mismatch as that between Hebrew Bible interpretation and philosophy of religion in the first place. One maxim of “theological engineering” in the current paradigm holds that the very different nature of the two subjects suggests that they cannot be fused into a hybrid form of inquiry. Biblical studies are descriptive and historical, while philosophy of religion is evaluative and normative. Past attempts to read the texts from a philosophical perspective—and there have been many—are now considered to have failed spectacularly. Philosophical concerns, categories, and concepts have severely distorted biblical thought. Characterized by nonphilosophical genres, the texts show no overt concern with philosophical issues. They contain neither philosophical definitions, nor formal arguments seeking to justify religious truth claims. The last two centuries of biblical criticism since the separation of biblical and dogmatic theology have therefore taught us, if anything, that the Hebrew Bible is not a philosophical textbook.

As for philosophy of religion, in the West the discipline tends to be equated with a critical appraisal of philosophical concepts in contemporary Judeo-Christian religious truth claims. In stereotyped formats it is difficult to distinguish the field from normative metaphysical speculation, Christian apologetics, Christian philosophical theology, and so on. Hence

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7. To be sure, a word search on the internet will reveal entries concerned with a “biblical philosophy” of something in the vulgar sense of the term, as can be seen by doing a Boolean word search with “Bible” and “philosophy” on the Internet. Here one finds titles such as “A biblical philosophy of X” or “Biblical philosophy as X,” but most of the time the term “philosophy” is used in the populist sense of “opinion.”

8. Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 146, emphasis added.

belief revision in the history of Israelite religion, synchronic theological pluralism, narrative and poetic representation, as well as metaphorical god-talk all seem profoundly problematic to any reader of the Hebrew Bible with some historical consciousness. We look in vain for any overt philosophy of religion in the texts and cannot construct a unified contemporary relevant philosophy of religion from its contents.

But if we grant all this, which I do, why should anyone even want to consider the possibility of a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion in the first place?

#### 1.4. RATIONALE FOR A DESCRIPTIVE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO ANCIENT ISRAELITE RELIGION

For my proposal of a philosophical approach to the study of ancient Israelite religion to be taken seriously, it will have to satisfy two requirements. First, I will have to demonstrate the possibility of involving philosophy of religion in historical biblical interpretation without repeating the hermeneutical fallacies of the past. Second, I will have to show that a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion is worth our while and able to deliver insights into the meaning of the biblical materials that already existing approaches to the text are unable to offer. In this regard, I offer a number of reasons as to why a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion is not a luxury but a necessity.

First, there is the requirement to be *comprehensive* in our understanding of ancient Israelite religion. In the scientific study of religion, it is taken for granted that linguistic, literary, historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, and theological perspectives must be supplemented by a *philosophical* approach to obtain a holistic understanding of the religion in question:<sup>9</sup>

The study of religion, to be complete, needs to address basic philosophical questions about what exists (metaphysics), what can be known (epistemology), about what is valuable (value theory and ethics)... Phi-

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9. Peter Connolly, ed., *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Continuum, 1999). For a survey and discussion of approaches to the study of religion, see Robert A. Segal, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (BCR; New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

losophy is hard to avoid. Even radical dismissal of philosophy involves a philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

One cannot begin to comprehend the fundamental structures of meaning even in the study of ancient prephilosophical religions without attending to their texts' basic assumptions regarding reality, knowledge, and value. It is therefore impossible to understand the conceptual backgrounds implicit in the Hebrew Bible without a descriptive philosophical clarification of the metaphysical, epistemological and moral presuppositions of its discourses.

Second, a philosophical approach can help us to avoid possible anachronistic *philosophical-theological* distortions in our research. Unless we are able to come up with a historical-philosophical clarification of the concepts, beliefs, and practices of ancient Israelite religion for its own sake, we are left with a scenario in which we have no formal means of controlling our tendency to project our own anachronistic Jewish or Christian philosophical-theological assumptions about religious language, religious epistemology, the nature of God, the existence of God, the problem of evil, and so on, onto biblical god-talk. Contrary to popular belief, therefore, we actually need *more*—not fewer—philosophical inquiries, precisely because the Hebrew Bible is not a textbook in the philosophy of religion.

Third, *descriptive* methods have been available in philosophy of religion for quite a while now. Not all types of philosophical analysis of religion are critical, speculative, systematic, or normative in nature. Certain methods in analytic, phenomenological, and comparative currents in philosophy of religion offer tools that can be utilized purely with the aim of clarifying meaning. These methods make a historical approach within philosophy of religion possible. In turn, descriptive philosophies of religion are suitable for use in biblical criticism with its historical agenda. Since philosophy of religion is no longer necessarily an endeavor whose concerns are limited to apologetics or natural a/theology, the popular objections to the involvement of it in biblical studies do not apply here.

Fourth, there exists a *yawning philosophical gap* in research on the Hebrew Bible. Neither philosophers of religion (including Jewish philoso-

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10. Charles Taliaferro, "Philosophy of Religion," in Segal, *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, 123. The need for a philosophical approach to the concept of deity is also explained by Raimundo Panikkar, "Deity," *ER* 4:274–76.

phers) nor Hebrew Bible scholars have made much effort to come up with purely descriptive, in-depth philosophical accounts of the beliefs, practices and concepts of ancient Yahwism(s). On the one hand, philosophers of religion (and Jewish philosophers) focus mostly on contemporary or past *philosophical* traditions within Judaism and Christianity and do not have any desire to engage in a philosophical analysis elucidating ancient Israelite religion for its own sake. On the other hand, scholars of the Hebrew Bible who do study ancient Yahwism(s) have by default adopted all possible approaches in religious studies, except a *philosophical* one. So neither biblical scholars nor philosophers of religion study ancient Israelite religion descriptively from the perspective of issues on the agenda in philosophy of religion.

Taken together, these four points offer a cumulative argument as to why a philosophical account of biblical Yahwism is timely, sorely needed and, perhaps most important of all, possible.

### 1.5. OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

During the twentieth century, a debate has raged regarding the place and role of philosophy as such in Hebrew Bible studies in general, and within Old Testament theology in particular.<sup>11</sup> The contents of this book are not intended to contribute to that discussion and I leave it to biblical theologians to decide how they wish to operate in relation to philosophy *per se*. Instead, my aim is to argue in favor of the establishment of a new and independent interpretative methodology exclusively concerned with involving philosophy of religion in particular as an auxiliary subject. As such my goals overlap with, yet differ from, those of biblical theology; just as the objectives of philosophy of religion overlap with yet differ from those of systematic theology.

That being said, it is of paramount importance to note that the aim of this study is *not* to show how the Hebrew Bible can contribute to popular debates in contemporary Jewish or Christian philosophy of religion. Rather, the objective is to demonstrate how currents in descriptive philosophy of religion can be of use to biblical scholars concerned with the clarification of meaning in the Hebrew Bible. The findings of this type of historical-philosophical analysis may or may not be relevant to philoso-

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11. See James Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, 146–71.

phers of religion or biblical theologians proper. Whether they are can at best be an epiphenomenon of the descriptive philosophical enterprise. When philosophical-atheological relevance becomes a guiding principle it predisposes us to distortive readings.

My agenda, therefore, has nothing to do with a personal interest in either defending or criticizing Yahwistic religious beliefs to edify the ideological agenda of any religious or secular community of readers. I have no desire to read (Judeo-Christian) philosophy into the Hebrew Bible, nor any hope to construct a (Judeo-Christian) systematic philosophy of religion from its diverse contents.<sup>12</sup> I have no intention to *reinterpret*, actualize, or demythologize the text for existentialist theological purposes. Neither am I after a reductionist philosophical (e.g., naturalist) *explanation* of Israelite religion or a neo-Yahwistic philosophy of religion seeking to subvert current constructions of reality. All I seek to do is to pioneer a new approach within biblical studies aimed at a descriptive philosophical elucidation of the beliefs, concepts, and practices of ancient Israelite religion as represented in the Hebrew Bible.

#### 1.6. OUTLINE OF CONTENTS

The presentation to follow is divided into two parts corresponding roughly to the theory and the practice of the new approach.

Part 1 consists of chapters 2 to 8, which provide the backdrop to, the justification for, and the details of the new methodology.

In chapter 2 we face our demons with the aid of metaphilosophy of religion and discover a plurality of answers to the question of what exactly a philosophical approach to the study of religion is supposed to be. Chapter 3 traces historical relations between Hebrew Bible interpretation and philosophy of religion, from the perspective of biblical studies. In chapter 4 we invert our point of view to look at relations between the disciplines from the perspective of philosophy of religion. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of relevant descriptive currents in the philosophical study of religion, and also refutes a number of popular objections against the involvement of philosophy in the study of the Hebrew Bible. In chapter 6, we consider a few possible analogies from both philosophy and biblical studies for imagining the presence of folk-philosophical assumptions in

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12. On the suspicion of system as manic, see Don Cupitt, *Philosophy's Own Religion* (London: SCM, 2001), 170 n. 3.

the biblical discourse itself. In chapter 7 I introduce the theory behind “philosophical criticism” as new exegetical methodology and in chapter 8 look at the theoretical intricacies of involving and combining descriptive varieties of philosophy of religion on a larger scale.

As illustration of how the theory can be applied to operate in practice, we come to part 2, which consists of chapters 9 to 15. Here, loci on the agenda of philosophy of religion are descriptively brought to bear on the Hebrew Bible. This section shows some of the tangible results that can be achieved when we look at and clarify what we have in the Hebrew Bible from the perspective of descriptive currents in philosophy of religion.

Chapter 9 deals with the nature of religious language in ancient Israel via a philosophical reassessment of many popular ideas in biblical theology. In chapter 10, I offer an introductory philosophical analysis of the concept of generic godhood in ancient Israelite religion. In chapter 11, we consider some proposals and prospects for a philosophical theology of the Hebrew Bible. In chapter 12, we look at traces of natural a/theologies implicit in the biblical discourse and discuss some interesting issues in ancient Israelite ontology. The subject of chapter 13 is the epistemology of Israelite religion, while chapter 14 deals with the relationship between religion and morality in the Hebrew Bible (especially metaethics). Chapter 15 is the conclusion to the study.

### 1.7. A SUPERMODERN DISCLAIMER

Books on the Hebrew Bible, whatever form they take, often tell readers as much about their authors as about their subject, if not more. This study’s plea for a philosophical approach to the text does not naively operate with either precritical or positivist assumptions about the interpretative task. I know as well as anybody that Christian philosophical concerns are anachronistic and that pure historical description is a myth (in the pejorative sense of the word). I am quite familiar with and accept the hermeneutical insights of Gadamer and Ricoeur, who showed us the ways in which the exegete is and remains a historical animal, never totally abstracted from the local sociocultural matrix. I realize that my philosophical concerns are not transhistorical or perennial in any sense.

However, the context in which this study asks to be located is not so much postmodernism as *supermodernism*. The term is lesser known in biblical hermeneutics and comes from anthropologist Marc Augé’s book,



*Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.<sup>13</sup> While most biblical scholars appear to be modernists working on premodern texts in a postmodern world, I would like to imagine that this study is novel not only in terms of methodology but also in terms of its location within the “supermodern condition.” Characterized by an excess of time, space and ego, all of which supervene on the present study in ways that distinguish its utilization of philosophy of religion from postmodern obsessions with social and literary philosophy, supermodernism can be introduced in the following manner:

If distinguished from hypermodernity, supermodernity is a step beyond the ontological emptiness of postmodernism and relies upon a view of plausible truths. Where modernism focused upon the creation of great truths (or what Lyotard called ‘master narratives’ or ‘metanarratives’), postmodernity is intent upon their destruction (deconstruction). In contrast supermodernity does not concern itself with the creation or identification of truth value. Instead, information that is useful is selected from the superabundant sources of new media. Postmodernity and deconstruction have made the creation of truths an impossible construction. Supermodernity acts amid the chatter and excess of signification in order to escape the nihilistic tautology of postmodernity. The Internet search and the construction of interconnected blogs are excellent metaphors for the action of the supermodern subject.<sup>14</sup>

In supermodernism it is not that the world or the text lacks meaning—rather, there seems to be too many possible meanings to discern from. It is in the recognition of this that the theoretical discussion in this study now commences.

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13. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* (trans. John Howe; London: Verso, 1995).

14. “Hypermodernity,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* [cited 16 January 2010]. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hypermodernity&oldid=329598080>.