What is a god? *Meta*theistic assumptions in Old Testament Yahwism(s)

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"What's a god? You can talk to me about theology but that doesn't tell me a thing."

(Anonymous)

ABSTRACT

***What* is a god? *Meta*theistic assumptions in Old Testament Yahwism(s)**

In this article, the author provides a prolegomena to further research attempting to answer a most fundamental and basic question – much more so than what has thus far been the case in the disciplines of Old Testament theology and history of Israelite religion. It concerns the implicit assumptions in the Hebrew Bible's discourse about the fundamental nature of deity. In other words, the question is not, "What is YHWH like?" but rather, "what, according to the Old Testament texts, is a god?"

1   INTRODUCTION

In the discipline of *Old Testament Theology*, the interest lies, *inter alia*, with answering a particular question. This question may be formulated in the following manner: what is YHWH like, according to the Old Testament texts? (cf. Brueggemann 1997:1) In the discipline known as *history of Israelite religion*, the same question is asked, albeit answered from a diachronic perspective aimed at reconstructing the historical contents and developments of Israelite god-talk (cf. Albertz 1992:1).

In both disciplines, however, what is taken for granted is the assumption that YHWH belongs to the class or category of beings called 'gods' (cf. Eichrodt 1961:114; Gottwald 1979:667f). But this assumption itself is, however, seldom itself an issue of interest. Neither Old Testament theologians nor historians of Israelite religion seem to have given much thought to it or the altogether more fundamental question it gives rise to. The question implied here is

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not, 'what, according to the Old Testament texts, is YHWH *like?'*, but, '*what*, according to the Old Testament texts, is a god?' (cf. Kruger 1989:1-3; Cupitt 1997:35)

2   THE NOVELTY OF THE RESEARCH

Of course, *meta*theological inquiry regarding metatheistic assumptions is not completely novel and scientists of religion have constructed classification systems into which the Old Testament texts have been contextualised within a larger religio-historical and religio-cultural context (cf. Pannikar 1987:274-276; Ludwig 1987:69-78; Sullivan 1987:166-181; cf also Owen 1971). However, such classifications tend to generalise and have seldom been based on an in-depth inquiry by *Old Testament* scholars themselves into *Old Testament meta*theology.

Of course, a few Old Testament scholars have indeed dabbled with or noted the absence of and need for *meta*theological enquiry (e.g. Saggs 1978; Ringgren 1979:41; Patrick 1984:24f; Gottwald 1979:667, Kaiser 1993:90, Knierim 1995:286-306; van der Toorn 1999:911-919; Smith 2001:83-103; etc). However, in each case *meta*theological analysis has remained on the margins of the particular investigation, which in the end turns out to have rather different primary concerns. As for a compulsory *philosophical* dimension in *meta*theological analysis, this has seldom if ever featured in any real sense, for the interest was always mainly in aspects of *history of religion* and *comparative religion* (cf. Barr 1999:146-168).

For example, a prominent Old Testament and Ugaritic scholar such as Mark Smith (2001) specifically notes that question 'what is a god?' is absolutely central, yet seldom discussed by Old Testament scholars (Smith 2001:6). He implies that it has never really received the adequate attention it deserves and has never been addressed from a comprehensive perspective. He also explicitly states his intention to provide an answer to that question (Smith 2001:6). However, in the end, it seems that the particular topic is not the exclusive concern of the study but in fact becomes subordinated to a larger comparative religious enquiry about the origins of monotheism in ancient Israel vis-à-vis the polytheistic Ugaritic/Israelite background.

Moreover, true to form as Old Testament scholar, Taylor does not bother with a utilisation of *philosophy of religion* – which is indispensable on the level of *meta*theological enquiry. This beside

the fact that there is very little in-depth and sustained *exegetical* engagement with the relevant Old Testament texts themselves, other than haphazardly listing and quoting numerous texts in support of particular claims (Smith 2001:83-103 and *passim*). All these features contribute to a study which, though interesting and for the most part of high quality, has not provided a satisfactory and comprehensive answer to the burning question: 'what is a god?'

But if Smith is brief, his predecessors and dialogue partners are even more so. This is, as is the case with Smith, not so much due to a fatal flaw on the part of the particular scholar but simply due to the fact that *meta*theistic assumptions are seldom, if ever, the main interest of scholars who have had something to say with regard to Old Testament *meta*theology. In addition, like Smith they give very little thought whatsoever to anything related to philosophy in relation to Old Testament religion (cf. Saggs 1978; cf. Ringgren 1979; Patrick 1984; Gottwald 1979, Kaiser 1993; Van der Toorn 1999:911-919; a relative exception to the rule is, Knierim 1995).

In the research envisaged in this article, one should strive to go beyond such non-philosophical, cursive and marginalized discussions of what is indeed a very relevant and important issue in the context of Old Testament studies. Also, the envisaged inquiry should be *exclusively* concerned with asking the question 'what is a god?' and should be exclusively concerned with discussing the Old Testament's own *meta*theistic assumptions about the nature of deity – and not presume what is commonplace in either science of religion or philosophical/systematic theology with regard to the same question.

3   THE AVAILABILITY OF RESEARCH DATA

Even though there is not explicit and systematic metatheistic discourse in the Old Testament itself, the texts witness to numerous *meta*theistic *assumptions* taken for granted by the biblical authors. In addition, though there is no (Greek-type) philosophy, the discourse in the texts contains numerous ontological, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, and other related *assumptions*. And once this is recognised it should be clear that a philosophical approach to the *meta*theistic assumptions in the text, and one which is solely concerned with identifying, reconstructing and discussing these assumptions, *can* be as hermeneutically and exegetically sound as

any other. For it too, being critical, will attempt to avoid at all costs forcing a foreign system onto the textual data.

*In this regard, meta*theistic assumptions are present and implicit in a variety of intra-textual and inter-textual contexts within the Old Testament corpus. A rather obvious if somewhat overlooked treasury of relevant discourse presents itself in the many Old Testament texts that speak of deity in the *generic* sense, thus providing direct evidence of the contents of *meta*theistic assumptions in ancient Israelite religion. For example:

You will be like gods, those who know good and evil;
<div align="right">(Gen 3:5)</div>

He will be a mouth for you and you will be a god to him;
<div align="right">(Ex 4:16)</div>

The Egyptians are humans and not gods and their horses are flesh and not spirit;
<div align="right">(Isa 31:3)</div>

Tell us the signs of what will come after and make (them) known because you are gods;
<div align="right">(Isa 41:23)</div>

You made him a little less than a god;
<div align="right">(Ps 8:3)</div>

I said that you are gods, but now you will die like humans;
<div align="right">(Ps 82:6)</div>

Men whose strength is their god;
<div align="right">(Hab 1:11)</div>

As is apparent from texts like these, references containing implicit assumptions about the nature and/or function of deity (often vis-à-vis humanity) occur in a variety of different scriptural contexts, in different historical contexts, in different ideological and theological contexts, in different literary contexts (different genres), and in different types of religious language. However, notwithstanding the plurality of context, usages, functions and applications of the word 'god' within the Old Testament, all generic references to the divine are in some way informative with regard to what some people of Old Testament times assumed about the nature of deity.

Given the fact that *meta*theistic assumptions may be implicit in various types of religious language (e.g. metaphorical, literal, analogical, symbolical, non-cognitive, etc) careful exegesis is necessary of any particular text so as to not attempt to divorce such

assumptions from the literary, social, historical and theological context in which they occur (cf. Hick 1993:32-41).

Moreover, as there is not one but many Old Testament theologies, so too there may well be more than one Old Testament *meta*theology, i.e. the *meta*theistic assumptions of one text may contradict those in another text (e.g. on the question whether a god can die, cf. mythical texts like Genesis 3:22 (no) versus Psalm 82:6 (yes). In addition, it can be expected that there will be many texts in the Old Testament in which, analysis free from dogmatic ideological constraints will show that, contrary to what is considered credible in many a modern theology, its was not always assumed that deity is single, incorporeal, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, etcetera (cf. Fretheim 1984).

Awareness of such pluralism in and the pre-Christian nature of the data in no way rules out the possibility of – or represents a serious obstacle to – assessing the data from the perspective of philosophical analysis. If fact, such analysis might reveal, *inter alia*, that it is anachronistic to speak of *all* religious language in the Old Testament as being metaphorical, for there are several references to the divine when this seems not to have been the case (e.g. YHWH's 'feet' in Ex 24 or his 'face' and 'back' in Ex 33). Even a term like 'anthropomorphism', may also turn out to be anachronistic and out of place a relation to texts in which some of the ancients themselves thought it was actually the other way around (i.e. *humans* are spoken of in *theo*morphic terms, etcetera (cf. Gen 1:26-27).

Of course, *meta*theistic assumptions are not only present in generic references to deity but also in discourse about YHWH in general, in polemics against other gods, in the etymologies of divine names, in personal names with theophoric elements, in place names, etc. (cf. also Gerstenberger 2002) In this regard it may be said that, like other ancient Near Eastern peoples, Israel simply accepted without question the belief that god(s) exist(s), have immense power, that their knowledge is vastly superior to that of humans, that they are usually immortal, that they control the cosmic and social orders, that they possess the rights to rule particular nations, that they must be worshipped, that they demand obedience to ethical norms, that they communicate with humans through selected mediators, that they reside in the skies and in temples, that they are spirit rather than

flesh, etc. (cf. Van der Toorn 1999:245-252; cf. also Assman 1979; Jacobson 1979).

But each of these taken-for-granted assumptions, when recast in the form of *'why?'*-questions, presents some interesting *meta*theological and philosophical puzzles that have seldom being taken seriously given their awkward nature. For example:

1. *Why* do gods create?

2. *Why* do gods *want* to rule people?

3. *Why* do gods *want* to be worshipped?

4. *Why* do gods communicate with humans mostly indirectly, preferring obscure and mediated types of revelation? Etc.

In other words, in addition to the descriptive analysis involved in Old Testament theology, certain basic, more philosophical, but generally evaded questions arise as a result of *meta*theological inquiry that similarly go beyond what is done in Old Testament theology. Answers to these questions must first of all be sought in the immediate context of a particular text itself, taking seriously what the ancients themselves believed with regard to the particular matter rather than what we in a modern context would anachronistically like them to believe given our own dogmatic prejudices and theological preferences (cf. Gericke 2005).

4 FURTHER METHODOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTI-CAL CONSIDERATIONS

As noted above, the envisaged research will opt for the utilisation of philosophy of religion as primary auxiliary discipline for this inquiry. On the one hand, this choice of mode of interdisciplinary research is justified if only because it has been so neglected in Old Testament scholarship. On the other hand, another major motive behind the choice for *philosophy of religion*, as opposed to history-, sociology-, or psychology of religion is pragmatic.

After all, not only is philosophy by nature a higher-order discipline (i.e. a meta-science) that incorporates what historians, sociologists and psychologist themselves tell us anyway. In addition, it is philosophy that is particularly concerned with and suited to deal with conceptual meta-analysis, involving as it does by nature, fundamental conceptual scrutiny and questions of the 'what is x?' type (e.g. what is 'good', 'truth' or, in our case 'deity').

However, since the inquiry will be part of *Old Testament Studies* and not of systematic theology or philosophical theology, the concern is not with asking what deity is *per se or in general,* or for that matter, how *we today* should think of deity. Instead, we are concerned with the *Old Testament's own* assumptions on the matter and the philosophical questions these *Old Testament* assumption*s* give rise to.

On this point, the type of *philosophy of religion* I am talking about here should not be confused or equated with, on the one hand, biblical theology, philosophical theology, dogmatic theology, systematic theology, apologetics, or polemics, etc. On the other hand, moreover, I am also not speaking of philosophy of *Christian* religion, philosophical metaphysics or ontology, natural theology, etc. Thus, as stated above, there is no intention to read the Old Testament as if it was philosophy or to uncritically transpose issues in *Christian* philosophy of religion onto a philosophical perspective on ancient Israelite religion.

What I envisage involves a radical adaptation and reconstruction of the agenda and its loci as attested in mainstream Judaeo-Christian *philosophy of religion.* This is a prerequisite to Old Testament *Meta*theology and any attempt at studying the Old Testament *philosophically*, so as not to get tangled up in anachronistic pseudo-problems (e.g. the relation between the divine and evil gives rise to the so-called *Problem of Evil* in *Christian* philosophy of religion because it is assumed that the divine must be both omnipotent and omnibenevolent and that evil exists. In many Old Testament texts, however, the divine is not in fact depicted as being either omnipotent or omnibenevolent, hence in the context of these texts at least, the *Problem of Evil* in its traditional format does not arise).

Contrary to what has been the case in *Old Testament Theology*, therefore, philosophical problems (e.g. ontological questions) cannot be bracketed on the level of *meta*theology. .Of particular interest will be a concern with the *nature of the religious language* involved in the *meta*theological analysis. For ones has to reckon with the reality not only of many different historical contexts, different social settings, different theological and ideological perspectives, but also deal with discourse that varies considerably between mythical, metaphorical, literal, symbolical, and other types of religious language).

On this point, Old Testament theologians are notorious for failing to distinguish between the different types of religious language and seem not to realise that in philosophy of religion it makes a great different whether the religious language under scrutiny happens to be metaphorical, symbolical, analogical, mythical, non-cognitive, etc. Thus biblical theologians can often be found failing to recognise the distinctions between such types and often speak of mythical, metaphorical and symbolical types of religious discourse as though all of these were synonymous (cf. Hick 1993: 66). Also with regard to language, the logical and espistemological status of god-talk in the Old Testament has to be reckoned with in any critical type of meta-analysis. Thus, the Old Testament *meta*-theologian will want to determine, for example, whether any particular proposition reconstructed as implicit from the textual data containing *meta*theistic assumptions concerning the nature of deity functions in the particular context as one that is analytic or synthetic, or whether it is derived from *a priori* considerations or from *a posteriori* ones.

In this regard, the problem of contradictions in talking about the divine attributes cannot be sidestepped either, especially in an analysis of a *pre*-philosophical and pluralist corpus of religious discourse such as is the case with the Old Testament. Moreover, on the level of *meta*theology, even *ontological* questions should not be bracketed – as they are in Old Testament theology (cf. Brueggemann 1997:70) – and an attempt should be made to explain what is meant by an assumption like YHWH 'exists'. Is the verb to be understood in terms of its referentiality in a *theologically* (as opposed to a metaphysically) 'realist' or 'non-realist' sense?

Other related questions also surface along with such ontological queries. E.g.: is the nature of the religious language in which the ontological proposition occurs literal, metaphorical, or even non-cognitive? What does this imply with regard to the ontological status of YHWH in ancient Israelite religion? Can the concepts of 'naïve-realism', 'critical realism' and 'non-realism' as encountered in (Christian) *philosophy of religion* (thus not to be confused with identical terminology in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of science, etc) be considered as being of any use in elucidating the text-reality-relation and the referential aspects of *Old Testament* god-talk? In other words, as far as the actual philosophical discussion involved in the envisaged research will be concerned,

since in our *philosophy of religion*, the 'religion' in question is Old Testament Yahwism(s) and *not* Christianity (another reason why this analysis is for *Old Testament* scholars, not systematic theologians or mainstream philosophers of religion), attention will be limited to identifying and describing philosophical problems that particular *meta*theistic assumptions *in the texts themselves* seem to give rise to.

In addition, as suggested earlier, discussions aimed at answering these questions will generally be limited to those problems with regard to which the Old Testament *itself* reveals some perplexity or diversity of opinion about the particular issue and itself contains and answer (or more than one answer) to it, even if only in implicit embryonic form (e.g. the *Eutyphro* dilemma: Is what is good such because the gods consider it to be the case or do gods consider something good because it is such intrinsically, cf. Gen 18 (which implies morality is higher that divinity) versus Gen 22 (which suggests that whatever the divine commands is right).

Thus no attempt will be made to actually come up with abstract solutions to such problems that are utterly alien to the Old Testament's own religious ideas and the directions to which its own grappling with related issues were heading. Ultimately, however, the concern with philosophical issues, though related to the *meta*theological research envisaged, will be *subordinated* to the *primary* concern, which is the identification and descriptive reconstruction of the *meta*theistic assumptions themselves. Thus in no way will the research ever turn into *Procrustes'* bed of philosophical *eis*egesis into which the *meta*theological enquiry is made to fit at all costs.

Unfortunately, due to the limitations incumbent on the writing of an article aimed at being a prolegomena, I cannot elaborate in more detail with regard to the philosophical dimension subsidiary to the *meta*theological analysis itself. This is unfortunate, for many Old Testament scholars are quite wary of any philosophical probing and might still be unclear as to my intensions or harbour reservations about the viability of such a rare form of interdisciplinary study in Old Testament interpretation. However, this very rarity is precisely what is indicative of the need for more of such types of enquiry and also in a way that is of superior quality, methodologically sound, exegetically precise, historically sensitive, culturally aware and hermeneutically above suspicion.

5 A PRELIMINARY PROPOSED OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH

Research concerned with identifying, reconstructing, analysing and discussing the *meta*theistic assumptions in the Old Testament will do well to pay attention to the following systematic-topical conceptual schemata:

- Metatheistic assumptions in generic references to deity in the Old Testament;

- Metatheistic assumptions in names (divine names, personal names, place names, etc);

- Metatheistic assumptions in the Old Testament's characterisation of YHWH;

- Metatheistic assumptions in the Old Testament's references to other gods.

To organise the contents of each of these chapters/articles, a variety of topics can be constructed to give the presentation (not the Old Testament data!) a more systematic format. Included here would be *meta*theistic assumptions concerning, e.g.:

1) Deity and reality;

2) Deity and form;

3) Deity and substance;

4) Deity and space;

5) Deity and time;

6) Deity and power;

7) Deity and cognition;

8) Deity and conation;

9) Deity and morality;

10) Deity and relationships;

11) Deity and nature;

12) Deity and culture.

It is very important to take cognisance of the fact that even though these concepts sound 'modern', 'abstract' and 'philosophical', and appear suspicious if only for the reason that they are not found in the Old Testament itself, this should not be considered an invalidation of

the choice of categories and topics. For the *contents* and *reference* of the concepts themselves are indeed present in the texts, analogous to the way scholars speak, for example, of the 'religion' or 'history' of Israel, even though the Old Testament has no similar words for these phenomena.

The same justification of choice of terminology is operative in both instances. Also, as mentioned above, different parts of the Old Testament may witness to different assumptions on the same topics, assumptions which may at times even contradict each other. The objective of the research is not to harmonise such discrepancies nor to reject them or make a choice for one of them but merely to reconstruct and describe what is there and to demonstrate the questions these give rise to in relation to particular topics on the agenda in *philosophy of religion.*

6   THE VALUE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

Utilising *meta*theological enquiry (in combination with *philosophy of religion*) in Old Testament studies will be *intrinsically* worthwhile for what it might uncover and given the *contribution* it might make to a variety of disciplines both within Old Testament studies and without. From within it will surely deepen our understanding not only of ancient Israelite religion but will act as a reference point for all Old Testament theology, supplementing it with a more basic, fundamental and higher order of research data.

Moreover, such an inquiry will provide the scientists of religion with a mass of relevant and well-researched data, which will help prevent the pitfalls that are often encountered when religions are compared and non-specialists try to rope the texts into the service of their own unified theories.

Then there is the value such a *meta*theological inquiry might have for bridging the gap in communication between biblical studies and both systematic/philosophical theology and philosophy of religion in as much as it will uncover and bring to the fore data of direct interest to those pondering foundational assumptions in religious discourse.

7   CONCLUSION

There remains a distinct gap in the research within Old Testament scholarship as far as *meta*theological issues are concerned. *Meta*-theistic assumptions in particular have not been analysed and the

ideal auxiliary discipline – philosophy of religion – has not featured prominently in Old Testament studies. In order to rectify such an oversight, this article provided a prolegomena with suggestions for further research. Yet there is much to be done, for there is much to be discovered that now lies dormant in the ancient texts – waiting for us to come and see what we have all along taken for granted. And becoming conscious of one's presuppositions is the first step to transcendence.

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