WHAT IS YOUR GOD?
A CLASSIC PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON אלי-X THEOPHORY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

What, according to the Hebrew Bible, was a god assumed to be? In this article the author looks at data potentially relevant to any attempt at answering this question within a sub-type of אל theophory in the Hebrew Bible. These involve personal names that can be rendered into English as "My god is x", where x denotes a phenomenon the deity is prima facie wholly identified with. The approach adopted by the study is philosophical in general and descriptively metaphysical in particular. The objective is to provide an experimental clarification of this particular sub-type of proper names in Biblical Hebrew with the aid of technical conceptual distinctions found within mainstream interpretations of Aristotle's theory of predication.

INTRODUCTION

What is an אל? In response to this question, a variety of perspectives on the concept of generic divinity in the context of the Hebrew Bible are available in the literature (cf., e.g., Ringgren 1974:267–284, Schmidt 1994:331–347, Van der Toorn 1999:910–919, Smith 2001:81–102; Wardlaw 2008:1; Gericke 2009:20-45; McClellan 2013:1).

One section of data where the question of what, according to the HB, a god was has not received much attention, at least not from the variety of philosophical perspectives on essence. Otherwise, the study of theophoric elements in ancient Israelite personal names has a long tradition in Hebrew Bible (HB) scholarship (see Smith 1907:34–61; Noth 1928; Weiss 1952; Lawton 1977; Pike 1990; Schwennen 1995; Rechenmacher 1997; Hess 1998; Tigay 1986:83–85; 1987:157–194; 2004:34–43). Of interest to the question concerning the nature of deity is the fact that among proper names found within Biblical Hebrew (BH) itself, a number of cases involve אל-

theophory (see, e.g., Fowler 1988:111–112; Stuhlman 2004:24–25), from which one can select and reconstruct a new sub-type[1] where the proper name prima facie appears to represent an implicit answer to the question: "What is (your) god?"

Consider the following (BH name – "English translation" (HB reference); adapted from Stuhlman 2004:24–25):

1) אליאב – "My god is (a) father" (see Num 1:9; 1 Chron 6:12);

2) אלימלך – "My god is (a) king" (see Ruth 1:2);

3) אליעם – "My god is (a) kinsman" (see 2 Sam 11:3);

4) אלישבע – "My god is (an) oath (see Exod 6:23);

5) אלידע – "My god is knowledge" (see 2 Sam 5:16; 1 Chron 3:8);

6) אליעיני – "My god is my eyes" (see 1 Chron 26:3);

7) אליפז – "My god is fine gold" (see Gen 36:4);

8) אליחרף – "My god is winter" (see 1 Kgs 4:3);

9) אליעזר – "My god is help" (see Gen 15:2);

10) אליפלט – "My god is deliverance" (see 2 Sam 5:16);

11) אליצפן – "My god is protection" (see Num 3:30);

12) אלישוע – "My god is salvation" (see 2 Sam 5:15);

13) אליצור – "My god is (a) rock" (see Num 1:5).

From the outset it is granted that the listed proper names of this sub-type could be alternatively rendered, thereby expressing quite different concepts than those

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[1]   New in the sense that this further demarcation of the sub-type is not usually separated in the research. As regards what is meant by the concept of a sub-type, it represents the author's own additional distinction from among personal names with the theophoric element אל as prefix. Thus, if we take אל- theophory as the type, the idea of a sub-type would involve any further distinction such as whether the component אל constitutes the beginning or ending of the personal name, e.g., x-אל or אל-x, where x may be the name of a deity, an abstract noun or a verb. Additional distinctions might be whether אל is used as a personal name or common noun; the latter in our case is suffixed with a first person singular pronoun as in the examples above. Technically this could be called a sub-sub-type but such jargon becomes too laborious. A more detailed discussion of types and sub-types is beyond the scope of this article. However, for tables involving all related and other examples, types and distribution, see Stuhlmann (2004). And for a further clarification of the sub-type under consideration, see below under "An Aristotelian perspective".

reconstructed here.[2] Be that as it may, and other potential semantic ambiguities aside, to what extent could these names (if their translations as above are accepted) be seen as implied answers to the question of what a god was assumed to be?

RESEARCH PROBLEM, METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The question posed by the research problem of this study can be formulated as follows: can these personal names, from a philosophical perspective, be said to answer the question of what a god was? That is, do they give a real definition or express the essence of divinity? In response to this it must be said that due to the fact that research on theophoric elements in personal names in the HB has a long history in non-philosophical approaches, the chance of the reader in Semitics misunderstanding or having the wrong expectations of the present study is quite high.[3]

As far as methodology is concerned, this inquiry is intended as an analytic philosophical clarification of what, from a particular historical perspective, the implicit metaphysical assumptions were in a selection of personal names in BH that are seemingly related to the question of what, according to the HB, a god was assumed

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2   The senses of names of this sub-type, the references of their separate parts as well as the structure of the syntax involved are all a matter of widespread controversy (see Albertz 1992:98; Hess 1998:175–176; Hermann 1999:278; Zevit 2001:586–587). For example, perhaps the *yod* was not a first-person suffix qualifying "אל" but instead the prefix of an imperfect verb following upon the theophoric element. In this case the hypothetical copula presupposed to be present by this study could itself be an introjection into the proper name which actually exhibits a verbal structure (i.e., "My god will do/has (done) x"). If that is the case, the name would refer to an "act" of a "god/El/Yhwh", rather than to a property or state of affairs with which a personal god was identified.

3   This could also be the result of an inability on the part of the author to communicate his ideas more clearly. Suffice it to note that this study does not aim to contribute to the solving of some typically philosophical problem proper currently in vogue in that discipline. Neither is the problem purely hypothetical or without foundation in the textual data or research in Semitics itself. Yet it should not be confused with an attempt at engaging in the related research in Hebrew linguistics, such as studies on identity-relations (as this concept is used in that field). Rather, the present discussion represents an interdisciplinary approach which seeks to translate aspects of the selected data also of interest to many other disciplines into the language of a particular philosophical perspective. It may not solve the problems most Semitic scholars hope to solve, yet it might help to expose potential anachronistic philosophical assumptions on the part of the reader.

to be. As such, its objective is not to repeat the findings of important related studies in Biblical Hebrew linguistics, the history of Israelite religion or biblical theology mentioned earlier but instead to offer a separate supplementary philosophical take on the matter.

Outline and assumptions

As far as the outline of this study is concerned, the research features a discussion of the selected data via a number of metaphysical distinctions derived from an accepted mainstream interpretation of Aristotle's theory of predication (see Mesquita 2012:1–27). The assumption of doing so was not that Aristotelian philosophy is itself metaphysically warranted. On the contrary, it has, in many ways, been eclipsed in post-Fregean philosophy of language (see Angelelli 2004:55–80). Instead, adopting the jargon of Aristotle's metaphysics is done purely for the sake of seeing what turns up if the names under consideration are described from such a point of view in relation to the background question of what a god was assumed to be.

AN ARISTOTELIAN PERSPECTIVE

Aristotle's discussions of the phenomenon of predication are found in various texts, including his *On interpretation, The categories, Metaphysics, Pre-* and *Posterior analytics,* and *The topics* (see Aristotle 1963; 1971; 1994a; 1994b; and 1997). The ideas expressed in these texts are complex and have been the subject of diverse interpretations (see, e.g., Bäck 2000; Code 1985:101–131; Corkum 2013:793–813; Deurlinger 1970:179–203; Gyekye 1974:615–618; McKirahan 2001:321–328; Mesquita 2012:1–27; Mignucci 1996:1–20*;* Moravcsik 1967:80–96). For present purposes, suffice it to note that, from an analytic perspective, Aristotle's logic of predication can be said to involve two basic metaphysical[4] variables:

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4   The formula using the variables S and P here is to be situated in the context of analytic philosophy, not Biblical Hebrew linguistics. As such, the seemingly similar concerns of the two fields are not to be confused. In the context of Hebrew linguistics much of the present foci will no doubt seem a bit archaic, if not outdated. The same terminology (e.g., subject, predicate, identity) is even used differently. Yet because this article is concerned with reconstructing a historically classic philosophical (Aristotelian and metaphysical)

1) a subject S (Gr. *hupokeimenon*) is what a statement is about;

2) a predicate P (Gr. *katêgoroumenon*) is what a statement says about its subject.

Based on this distinction, let the prefixed theophoric element "My אל" in the proper names under consideration be called the subject (S). Furthermore, let the variable property x that the deity is associated with be signified by the predicate (P). Based on these variables, one may classify the particular sub-type of אל-theophory of interest to our discussion related to textual assumptions about what a god was by stating that it concerns only those personal names which:

a) begin with אל as prefix (as opposed to names where אל is a suffix);

b) involves אל generically ("a god", as opposed to the god El or Yhwh);

c) includes a first person singular suffix as part of the theophoric element (i.e., "אלי" "my god");

d) presupposes a copula between subject and predicate (i.e., my god [is] x);

e) has the formal form "S is P" (i.e., S being the subject and P the predicate category);

f) contains "אלי" as S (as opposed to "אלי" as P; i.e., "my god (S) is P"; not to be confused as a fact interchangeable with a) above);

g) can be said to instantiate x as P, where x is a property of "אלי" so that S is x(P);

h) is usually translated into English as "my god is x";

i) prima facie presupposes itself as being an implied answer to the question "What is your god?"

According to Aristotle's reconstructed theory of predication and the structure of propositions, the definition of an אל cannot be a statement-making sentence unless a copula (or similar concepts in different tenses) is added. When the copula is present, the following philosophical distinction can be made with reference to possible metaphysical assumptions implicit in this sub-type of אל-theophory:

1) If in the personal name "My אל"(S) has the property of being x(P), where P is a

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perspective on the data (and not an up-to-date linguistic one), any objections of the sort miss the point. It is not that related linguistic work is not important or irrelevant, only that in the context of historical-philosophical concerns, it is purposefully bracketed (and its findings taken for granted).

genus or related concept (so that "is" here means "has the property of being"), the copula can be said to assume the function of predication.

2) If "My אל"(S) has the property of being the same object who is associated with a particular property in x(P), so that x(P) is being used to indicate that "My אל"(S) as a subject is the same subject as being indicated in an object, the copula assumes the function of signifying identity (in the philosophical, metaphysical sense, not the ontological, linguistic sense).

A different albeit overlapping distinction in Aristotle's theory involves distinguishing predicates signifying "what it is" versus those signifying "what it means" (where "it" denotes S or "My אל"). In other words, there is a difference between saying of an אל what it is as opposed to saying of something that it is an אל (implying what it means to be an entity of this kind). Related metaphysical distinctions in the history of philosophy that come to mind are those between essence and existence and between real versus nominal definitions. In each case "whatness" is posited as something vis-à-vis "thatness". For Aristotle, the process of showing what an אל is involves "definition", while saying that this or that is what it means to be an אל amounts to "demonstration" (both technical philosophical terms). This in turn leads to the question of which of these kinds of ontological underpinning proper names of the form "My אל (S) is x(P)" presupposes.

Prima facie, these names do indeed seem to say something about the quiddity ("whatness") of divinity, i.e., something about a divine "essence" (i.e., "what an אל is"), almost as if the names were meant to be an answer to the question of what a personal god was assumed to be (i.e., an identity statement). But if this were the case then, on Aristotle's account, names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)" cannot be considered to involve predication proper. The reason for this is that, for Aristotle, a predication of essence is not predication proper but definition (see Mesquita 2012:2). So, do proper names of this sub-type of אל-theophory in the HB involve definitions of an אל (in Aristotle's terms)? Briefly stated, the answer to this question is negative. To understand why, the metaphysical relations involved in proper names of the "אלי"-x sub-type require closer scrutiny.

ESSENTIAL VERSUS ACCIDENTAL PREDICATION

On Aristotle's account, only a proposition similar to the form "Yhwh is an אל" (as in the name Yael; cf. Eliyah) amounted to essential predication. In other words, only in cases of אל-theophory where אל is a suffix (i.e., where the theophoric element is itself the predicate P, instead of being the subject S), can proper names with אל-theophory be seen as containing identity claims (with reference to deity as genus following a noun or verb as part of the structure of a proper name, i.e., x is an אל). But since the x(P) part in names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)" never involves a genus under which the personal deity is said to fall one may conclude that they describe something less fundamental. That is, these names associate a phenomenon with the divine nature that merely happens to be the case, and then only with reference to a particular אל.

What this means is that, in proper names containing the proposition "my אל(S) is x(P)", we are indeed dealing with Aristotelian predication proper (as opposed to definition or identity statements). More specifically, what we encounter is what Aristotle would see as being "accidental" predication only. The concept of accidental predication presupposes the popular albeit not uncontroversial metaphysical opposition between essential and accidental properties. The latter represents a distinction which has itself been characterised in various ways (see Robertson & Atkins 2013:n.p.). For present purposes, it is sufficient to let the concept of an essential property of an אל be seen as one that it must have to be an אל, while an accidental property denotes one a particular אל happens to have but could lack without ceasing to be an אל. Indeed, it does seem that, in names stating "My אל(S) is x(P)" (where x is the property of being things like a father, a king, knowledge, gold, winter, salvation, etc.), the personal deity could have lacked the property x in P and still be classified as being an אל. Not all deities necessarily had the property in question, hence its "accidental" status.

Against the backdrop of the aforementioned essential/accidental property dualism, additional intricate and refined distinctions can now be made with reference to metaphysical assumptions implicit in proper names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)". According to Mesquita (2012:1) "predication" is indeed quite a complex entity in

Aristotelian thought that can be said to assume, generically, at least five forms:

1) the predication of essence, that is of the genus of a personal אל and the specific *differentia* of a personal אל;

2) essential predication, that is either of the genus of a personal אל or of the *differentia* of a personal אל (or their *genera*);

3) the predication of accidents of a personal אל per se;

4) the predication of simple accidents of a personal אל; and

5) accidental predication of a personal אל.

Of these only 3–4 (the predications of (simple) accidents) are in Aristotle's theory predication proper. They are also present in the x(P) part of names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)". This much seems clear, irrespective of additional possible technical linguistic distinctions between accidental predication featuring rank or titles (e.g., king, father, kinsman, etc.), abstract forms of actions (deliverance, salvation, protection), metaphorically associated natural phenomena (fine gold, a rock, winter, etc.), quintessential divine abilities (e.g., knowledge), and other miscellaneous variables (e.g., an oath).

   That is, upon closer inspection it would seem that in BH personal names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)" do not, as would prima facie seem to be the case, say what an אל as such is essentially (thereby defining it). Rather, if anything, they state what a particular אל was or happened to be accidentally, perhaps even only in relation to the particular individual at the moment of naming. Thus in a non-technical sense there is indeed identification as well as equivocation involved, seeing as the ontological subject "My אל" does undergo some sort of implied displacement to the syntactic position of the predicate x(P), which is not, in essence, its own. Yet from an Aristotelian perspective the names involve accidental predication only and as such do not really answer (or were intended to respond to) the question of what an אל is in the sense of satisfying all the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of being a metaphysical definition stating strict identity between the deity and the phenomenon x.

PREDICATION AND THE CATEGORIES

To further justify the preliminary conclusion above within an Aristotelian theoretical framework, the notion of predication should be seen in relation to what in Aristotle's metaphysics is called "The categories" (*katêgoriai*). Within the latter an אל qua genus would be classified as being a secondary substance, while a personal אל (like Yhwh) is an example of a primary substance. Thus in personal names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)" a god in the generic sense is not additionally taxonomically classified, despite the fact that, in some HB texts (but not all), being an אל involves being a species of a super-genus, e.g., of spirit.

In addition, what was meant by being an אל in the context of personal names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)" can be further clarified with reference to the eight other Aristotelian categories besides the one of substance. For this purpose, consider the following reconstruction of Aristotelian Categories (adapted from Smith 2015:n.p.).

Traditional name	Literally	Greek	Examples
Substance Primary Secondary	Who it is What-it-is	*ousia tode ti ti esti*	Yhwh An אל
Quantity	How much	*poson*	Height/length of an אל
Quality	What sort	*poion*	Appearance/Abilities of an אל
Relation	Related to what	*pros ti*	An אל vis-à-vis its other
Location	Where	*pou*	In heaven, in the temple, etc.
Time	when	*pote*	Yesterday, in the beginning
Position	being situated	*keisthai*	Stands, sits
Habit	having, possession	*echein*	Is clothed, is armed
Action	doing	*poiein*	Kills, saves, heals
Passion	undergoing	*paschein*	Is wearied, is worshipped

Of interest here is the fact that while the various phenomena in x(P) prima facie all appeared as being structurally akin to secondary substances (from a metaphorical perspective), as if to say what a god is, as accidental predications they must now be located elsewhere. Despite featuring abstraction phenomena, it would seem that in personal names of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)" the properties stated in the x(P) part should perhaps be located within categories like those of quality (e.g., knowledge),

relation (e.g., father), habit (e.g., salvation), and action (help). In some cases the precise location involved might not be perfectly clear (e.g., is "deliverance" habit or action?). Conversely, the categories of quantity, location, time, position and passion do not appear to be involved in the accidental predications of x(P) (although other theophoric names in BH do feature these, see Stuhlman 2004:21–28 for instances).

As for the predication of accidents, what we are dealing with in names of the sub-type "My אל(S) is x(P)" is therefore a case of cross-categorical predication ("My אל(S)" come from a different category than the "x(P)" part). This kind of predication can also be called complex rather than simple (in the metaphysical sense). Restating the earlier conclusion in terms of the categories more formally then: if x(P) was predicated of "My אל"(S), and x(P) and "My אל"(S) were in the same category it could have been said that the predication stated metaphysically what "My אל"(S) is. However, since x(P) is, predicated of "My אל"(S) and x(P), and given that "My אל"(S) are in different categories, all the personal names within this sub-type of אל-theophory instead say something about what was involved in being the particular kind of god (usually in metaphorical terms).

"SAID OF" AND "PRESENT IN"

More specifically, from a descriptive metaphysical perspective the ten categories vis-à-vis names of the type "My אל(S) is x(P)" can also be related to the perennial philosophical distinction between universals and particulars on the one hand and that between two other Aristotelian oppositions:
1) things said of and things not said of an אל;
2) things present in and not present in an אל.
In Aristotle's theory of predication, a Universal would be what is said of "My אל"(S). In contrast, a Particular would be what is not said of "My אל"(S) (in as much as the latter is itself the particular). There are universals and particulars in all the categories and, taken in isolation, "אל" as common name would be a universal substance. However, once the first-person singular suffix is added to become "My אל"(S) it refers

to a particular substance (despite not being the name of a god). As for the predicate x(P) in "My אל(S) is x(P)", it in turn denotes a universal quality and would have been a particular only if the predicate in x(P) read "This x".

The subject and predicate in this sub-type of אל-theophory thus displays a metaphysical relation of fundamental ontological dependence. What is present in an אל as a subject, according to an Aristotle perspective, belongs to it. Yet it does so not as a non-mereological part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in. For Aristotle, it is the individual or personal אל that is ontologically primary so that:

1) every secondary (Universal) substance אל is predicated of (i.e., said of) some primary substance "My אל"(S);

2) every non-substance x(P) (whether Universal or Particular) is present in some primary substance "My אל"(S);

3) that is, every x(P) is either said of or present in "My אל"(S);

4) that, therefore, the genus אל and the properties of an אל as either said of or present in "My אל"(S) obtain only if primary substances like "My אל"(S) do.

On Aristotle's account, titles like "father", "king", "salvation" and any of the other properties (e.g., being winter, being fine gold, being knowledge, etc.) instantiated by the deity in the form of a genus or universal are all said of the particular rank that is present in "My אל"(S). So, for one and the same kind of thing, for these accidental properties to be in both this אל and that אל is just for the rank of this אל and the rank of that אל both to be classified as being this or that phenomenon. Such phenomena as accidental properties are (metaphorically) instantiated in a personal אל without being separate from itself, since it is just the common classification of the particular bits of rank in them both. What is present in "My אל"(S) is therefore, ultimately, individual. But just as individual substances (like a personal אל) can be classified under universals (like אל as common name or genus), so too can the properties of "My אל"(S) be classified under universals (e.g., any of the other properties instantiated in the list).

From the above it follows that, metaphysically speaking, proper names in BH of the form "My אל(S) is x(P)" do not provide an answer to the question of what an אל *qua* אל was essentially. Rather, they describe one thing (amongst others) that the

personal god was declared to be at a certain point in time (whether at birth or at another point in time). Such accidental predication thus likely obtained only within the context of certain temporal relations between the deity and the implied speaker (i.e., either the person assigning the name or the one who bears the name).

CONCLUSION

Does the sub-type of אל-theophory in the HB usually rendered in the form of the proposition "My אל(S) is x(P)" answer the question of what a god was? Based on an Aristotelian (philosophical) perspective on a particular set of data it is concluded that the onomastica involve the predication of accidental properties of divinity only, and this despite having the prima facie appearance of being identity statements involving essential predication or definition.

These observations were further substantiated from the perspective of Aristotelian category theory, which showed that proper names of the sub-type "My אל(S) is x(P)" involved cross-categorical predications. In addition, the deity referred to in "My אל(S)" was shown to represent a Particular while the accidental property stated in the predicate probably presupposes a Universal. Thus a definition of x(P) (where the latter's extension overlaps with the phenomena attested as x(P)) does not apply to "My אל"(S). Hence names of the sub-type "My אל(S) is x(P)" cannot be said to signify what-it-is with reference to an אל but rather simply one property of being that particular אל.

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