PHILOSOPHICAL REDUCTION(ISM) IN META-LANGUAGE RECONSTRUCTIONS OF YAHWEH AS RELIGIOUS OBJECT

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ABSTRACT

In Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholarship, one encounters a variety of reductive perspectives on what exactly Yahweh as religious object is assumed to be. In this article, a clarification of the research problem is followed by an introductory overview of what is currently available on this topic as is attested in the context of various interpretative methodologies and their associated meta-languages. It is argued that any attempt to describe the actual metaphysical nature and ontological status of the religious object in the jargon of a particular interpretative approach is forever prone to committing the fallacy of reductionism. Even so, given the irreducible methodological perspectivism supervening on heuristic specificity, reductive accounts as such are unavoidable. If this is correct, then it follows *a fortiori* that a unified theory (of everything Yahweh can be said to be) and an ideal meta-language (with which to perfectly reconstruct the religious object within second-order discourse) are *a priori* impossible.

INTRODUCTION

What exactly is Yahweh? To be precise, what have scholars of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament implied regarding the "original" or "most primitive" metaphysical nature and ontological status of Yahweh in the world outside the text?

Curiously, there is presently no comprehensive history of related scholarly literature available. One reason for this is that the topic, as an issue of interest and as a separate focus area generating ongoing discussion, does not yet exist. Instead, all that is available are traces of isolated related claims or insinuations encountered in research focused on something else altogether. In light of this state of affairs, rather than putting forward a new proposal in answer to the initial question, this study will seek to contribute something original by offering a philosophical prolegomenon to all future

related research. The objective will be to demonstrate what is and will always be the nature and scope of claims made about Yahweh as religious object within the meta-language of a particular interpretative methodology.

In terms of outline, the study commences with a conceptual delimitation of the contextual meaning of the initial question constituting the research problem. Thereafter is a systematic introductory overview of a selection of relevant and related scholarly hypotheses within a method-specific reception history of the question as a second-order concern (cf. Smith 2010:18). With the stage now set, applicable issues related to the problem of reductive explanation in the philosophy of science are then briefly noted before showing how various types of theoretical reduction(ism) have inexorably supervened (and will continue to supervene) on the claims made directly or indirectly in the quest for the actual Yahweh. The article concludes with some of the far-reaching heuristic implications of its findings.

A CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE QUESTION

In the present context, what is meant by the question of the *whatness* of Yahweh in terms of what has been implied, related to the topic within varieties of biblical interpretation, should not be confused with classic philosophical-theological attempts to look for some essence of divinity *simpliciter* (cf. Cupitt 1996:37 and passim). Rather, the history of the problematic as it has evolved within modern and post-modern biblical scholarship reveals a different tendency altogether, namely, remarking on what appears to be the supposed latent (as opposed to manifest) identity conditions of textual representations of Yahweh. Each claim typically refers to some or other non-religious object (concrete or abstract) that is thought to be alluded to given the assumed ontological status and metaphysical nature of the deity *within* and as a construct of religious language translated into the meta-language of the particular approach.

In light of the above, what follows should not be confused with scholarly discussions of Yahweh within a typology of divinity (e.g., Smith 2001). Nor are we

interested in the question of Yahweh's corporeality (see Sommer 2009; Smith 2015:471–488). Nor is the focus on theories about the origins of Yahweh and Yahwism before and outside of Israelite religion and for their own sake (cf. van der Toorn 1999:909–915). Nor does the concern lie with the comparative religious-historical conceptual development of Yahweh in relation to other ancient Near Eastern gods (see e.g., Smith 2003). None of these interesting *topoi* are currently the primary issue under consideration and will not be directly involved in the discussion in any detailed manner.

As far as legitimacy and warranty is concerned, asking what Yahweh was originally assumed to be might seem *prima facie* controversial on so many levels, e.g., in the contexts of theories of interrogatives in disciplines like semantics, hermeneutics, methodology, ideology, theology, philosophy, etc. However, since no attempt is made to either ask or answer the question as such but rather to identify its covert presence and responses thereto in prior scholarship, the conceptual conundrums are presently not problematic. In addition, since the implication of the study is that no response to the question of what Yahweh is or was can be universal in expressive scope, this article does not seek to identify a new research problem (implying, after all, that it is insoluble) either. Instead, the objective is only to create awareness of how all talk about what Yahweh is or was will either be reductionistic in the sense of oversimplification, or, even at best, only point to some sort of relative identity. The latter is the inexorable outcome of there being no essential form of biblical interpretation so that one is always using the meta-language of a very specific auxiliary discipline, e.g., linguistics, literary-criticism, history, sociology, psychology, theology, etc., additionally limited by involving construction via the jargon of a particular school of thought, approach, model, theory or thinker therein.

Finally, with regard to the elephant in the room, the discussion to follow is not motivated by either an apologetic or atheological agenda. That is, there is no prior motive to construct the case in such a way as to either (in)validate the type of research, the topic, or (non-)belief in the religious object. Not that any claim to objectivity or personal religious neutrality is naively being made with reference to what follows,

either. It's just that the interest at present lies not with any particular response to the question but with demonstrating the ways in which the associated methodologies and meta-languages involved in such quests for the actual Yahweh will always be limited in explanatory scope.

REDUCTIVE CONJECTURES IN HISTORIES OF ISRAELITE RELIGION

Not surprisingly, the emerging critical-historical consciousness saw a quest for the "original" Yahweh enjoying a golden age during the nineteenth century (and up to the middle of the twentieth century) (cf. Oesterley and Robinson 1930:11–21 for an early overview). To be sure, pre-modern precursors and related suggestions were always there. For present purposes, however, the following selection of examples of the classic heyday of traces of (once) popular (but now mostly outdated) reductive accounts (with associated names and textual references) of Yahweh as religious object must suffice:

1) Yahweh as personified storm weather (cf. Exod 19; Job 37–38; Ps 29; etc.; suggested by, e.g., Wellhausen, Ward; op cit. Barton 1934:332);

2) Yahweh as totem or animal (e.g., a snake [cf. 1 Kgs 1:9] or bull [cf. Gen 49:24] cf. Stade, Hitzig; op cit. Eichrodt 1961:188);

3) Yahweh as divinised ancestor (1 Sam 28:13; and suggested by, e.g., Holscher, Achard; op cit. Barton 1934:333);

4) Yahweh as deified volcano (cf. Exod 19–20; and suggested by, e.g., Gunkel, Meyer; op cit. Barton 1934:332);

5) Yahweh as the moon (god) (cf. Hommel, Winckler, Zimmern and Nielsen; op cit. Barton 1934:332);

6) Yahweh as fire demon (cf. Meyer; op cit. Barton 1934:333);

7) Yahweh as tribal fetish (e.g., the ark; cf. Exod 25:15; Num 4:5,15, 10:35; 1 Sam 4:7,22; 2 Sam 6; Ps 132:8; cf. Bertholet 1926:301);

8) Yahweh as the sun (god) (cf. Num 6:25; 2 Sam 12:12–14; 1 Kgs 8; Ps 84:12; etc.; cf. Taylor 1993);

9)   Yahweh as the sea (god) (cf. Ps 42:7; Hab 3:15; op cit. Harwood 1992:71).

Based on certain popular theories on the origin and evolution of conceptions of divinity in the history of religion, many of these proposals assume (correctly or not) that animism and theriomorphism are more "primitive" and therefore more authentic candidates for the identity of the original religious object (following Tylor 1871). Yet others seem to presuppose that Yahweh was always understood as anthropomorphic, even if what was involved can be stripped of mythological embellishments and reduced to completely "natural phenomena" (see recently, Guthrie 1993). However, the seemingly crude identification of Yahweh with concrete objects like those mentioned in the list from 1)–9) will be misunderstood unless one keeps in mind the complex and intricate folk-philosophies of mereological relations between ancient Near Eastern gods and the objects they co-substantially overlapped with by way of ostensive definition, e.g., a statue, the sun, a human ruler, etc. (cf. Porter 2009).

As noted initially, historians of Israelite religion no longer venture such speculative hypotheses (cf. Albertz 1992:21; Zevit 2001:87). Even so, the merits or problems one might ascribe to each of the aforementioned attempted positive identifications of the religious object are not of concern here. The only interest currently is to note them as exemplars of a certain type of inquiry, done in a certain way, and being concerned with Yahweh as religious object in a certain sense.

REDUCTIVE ACCOUNTS IN LITERARY-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Since the second half of the twentieth century, isolated claims within historical-critical perspectives on what might have been the phenomenon supposedly originally associated with Yahweh began to be supplemented with more literary-critical approaches to the topic (cf. Spangenberg 1994:144–184; Barr 2000:12). Befitting of a more post-modern hermeneutical stance, scholarly claims about the metaphysical nature and ontological status of Yahweh as religious object no longer pretended to have identified some or other concrete entity in the world behind the text. Instead, operating within the framework of fictionalism and relative identity, it is implied that

for any entity X, X is identical to Yahweh in the actual world outside the text if it instantiates the same properties as those of Yahweh in any possible world of the text (cf. Patrick 1981:12). Not surprisingly, attempting to state what Yahweh was within the meta-language involved little more than stating the technically obvious.

According to David Gunn (1993:61):

> To claim that God-as-character in the Bible is not the creature of the author/narrator is, in my view, perverse.

Robert Carroll (1991:38) is of a similar opinion:

> The biblical God is a character in Hebrew narrative and therefore is, in a very real sense, a figure of fiction.

So is David Clines (1995:190):

> Let us next recognise that the God in the Pentateuch is a character in a novel. God in the Pentateuch is not a 'person'; he is a character in a book. And there are no people in books, no real people, only fictions; for books are made, not procreated …

As Walter Brueggemann (1997:33) puts it:

> Thus even with reference to God, the imaginative generative power of rhetoric offers to the hearer of this text a God who is not otherwise known or available or even – dare one say – not otherwise 'there'

With a more normative insistence coming from Thomas Thompson (1998:304):

> It is not a good idea to believe in a god when he is a character in story! Don't think for a moment that the narrator…or his audience ever believed in…that kind of god. This is the world that the teller has created for his representation of Old Israel…

To be sure, the claims made by these scholars should not be seen as mutually exclusive in relation to those of the historical perspectives of the previous section. Yet

how they are understood as regards their ontological implications will vary depending on the hermeneutic of the reader (see Gericke 2006:47–57):

1) On a *naive-realist* interpretation, claims like these will be interpreted to mean that "God," who is equated with Yahweh and the religious object, does not exist outside the text.

2) From a critical-realist viewpoint, fictional textual representations of Yahweh may have some or other counterpart, but only by way of highly imperfect approximation.

3) For the non-realist, textual constructions of the religious object are the beginning and end of what there is to be had, despite being infinitely malleable due to indefinite interpretative possibilities.

However one happens to assess these views, in the current context they too are simply to be noted, irrespective of their perceived merit or lack thereof.

PERSPECTIVES IN OTHER RELATED APPROACHES

Historical- and literary-critical perspectives dominate the genres of discourse featuring reductive claims about what Yahweh as religious object is thought to be. However, in other approaches, related ideas are also available (analogous to reductive accounts of the phenomenon that is religion, cf. Hick 1990:1–4). In this section, three more stereotyped reductions of the religious object will be mentioned briefly, i.e., sociological, psychological, and theological points of view.

1) In *sociological perspectives* related to our present interest, the religious object is often constructed as abstract rather than concrete (despite the use of fetishes to represent the former). One example is the suggestion that Yahweh was a symbol of the unified social construction of reality (see Gottwald 1979:666–675).

2) In *psychological perspectives* on the religious object, Yahweh is often assumed to be, *inter alia*, a mental particular or intentional object (of consciousness). This would include both positive accounts of Yahweh as a religious concept in a psychologically healthy mind (cf. Tarnas 1993:427) and negative assessments

suggesting Yahweh is an illusionary epiphenomenon of some form of mental disorder (cf. Freud 1939:39)

3) In *theological perspectives* on the supposed actual nature of Yahweh, attempted identifications of the religious object proceed from the philosophical concerns, concepts, and categories of Christian systematic theology (see Clines 1980:323–330; Barr 1999:138). Yahweh is thus constructed as a being with essential attributes (see Gowan 1994:ix). Religious language is reduced to the metaphorical mode for the construction of a theological profile (see Fretheim 1984:7–8).

To be sure, these three perspectives are stereotyped, since in reality scholarly discussions in each context are much more varied and nuanced. Even so, whatever one makes of the pros and cons of each type, again, for the present, it is simply the mere existence of these modes of reduction that must be noted for the sake of background in the discussion to follow.

THEORETICAL REDUCTION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

In philosophy (of science), reduction basically refers to positions "reducing" ideas from a theory to one that's less complex (cf. Fodor 1974:97; 1997:149). Usually this is taken to mean trying to look at what constitutes a phenomenon from the perspective of being able to look at it in terms of smaller, more basic parts, of reality. Alternatively, reductive explanations might involve looking at something seemingly abstract from the angle of one of the natural sciences instead of where the concept is most used, e.g., in the social sciences or humanities (see Ney 2008:n.p. and van Riel and van Gulick 2016:n.p. for online introductions to the topic).

Reductionism can occur in relation to objects, phenomena, explanations, theories, and meanings (cf. Hooker 1981: 38–59, 201–236, 496–529). Religious object reductionism generally attempts to explain religious objects by showing how they are in fact non-religious ones, be these abstract or concrete. In other words, in the perspectives noted above, we see for the most part attempts to reduce representations of Yahweh as a complex and multi-phenomenon religious object to individual,

constituent parts and their interactions. This occurred by way of theoretical reductionism, i.e., describing the religious object in the meta-language of a particular interpretative methodology, be it historical, literary, sociological, psychological, theological, or otherwise.

Each reductive account mentioned in the previous section also involved so-called conceptual or epistemological reductionism. By this is meant that scholars have tended to replace depictions of Yahweh in the world of the text with others from the worlds behind or in front of it, thereby hoping to provide a relationship between them. The objective is that the same ideas will be expressed by recourse to "levels" of explanation, thereby conceding to readerly limitations in grasping a lot of detail from an interdisciplinary perspective whilst looking at it through the concerns, concepts, and categories of a particular interpretative methodology's auxiliary discipline (be it history, literary theory, sociology, psychology, theology, etc.).

Cognisance should be taken of the fact that irrespective of the type of reductionism involved in describing Yahweh's perceived metaphysical nature and ontological status, it does not necessarily involve a denial of so-called emergent properties being instantiated by the religious object (cf. Butterfield 2011a:920–959). It does, however, imply that the phenomenon identified therewith is described in terms of the processes from which it is seen as being composed of in the context of the auxiliary discipline's theories and their associated jargon (cf. Butterfield 2011b:1065–1135)

Often there is an implication that the actual Yahweh is an epiphenomenon of the correct exegetical process (cf. in relation Jackson 1982:127–136). But in scholarly jargon, be it historical, literary, theological, or social scientific, as epiphenomenon the religious object is claimed to be "nothing but" the outcome of the workings of the fundamental phenomena (textual representations), although the epiphenomenon might be more simplistically described in very different terms, e.g., as "God". There is thus a tendency to avoid taking Yahweh as textual phenomenon as being important in its own right (cf. Brueggemann 1997:38, 117). This attitude may extend to cases where the fundamentals available in the meta-language of a particular methodological

perspective are not clearly able to explain Yahweh as epiphenomenon, though the reader expects them to be.

REDUCTIONISM VS REDUCTION

While reductionism regarding Yahweh as religious object can be considered as being metaphysically, ontologically, and even epistemologically problematic, reduction per se is less so and can be said to appear in three forms:

1) Reduction as *translation*: when Yahweh is said to be reducible to one or more objects if all statements about the religious object can be transformed into statements about these other objects (already since Carnap 1934:32).

2) Reduction as derivation: all other perspectives on Yahweh as religious object are seen as derivative of one interpretative methodology (already since Nagel 1961:345–358)

3) Reduction as explanation: when the meta-language describing Yahweh as religious object contains jargon not in the vocabulary of the text and any part of the textual data is alleged to be explainable by means of method's perspective and also at least as well systematised (already since Kemeny and Oppenheim 1956:13).

Ontologically, these reductions of Yahweh as religious object often involve an attempted unification of the identity of related phenomena (divine properties, types, or associated processes). Where the reduction of Yahweh to a particular phenomenon is carried out, one is justified in characterizing this as an *identification* ("explained to be"; cf. Nagel 1961:336). In this case, scholars seeking to identify the original phenomenon associated with Yahweh do not deny the extra-textual existence of what is described. Instead, they seek to explain it in terms of a currently more available reality. In other cases, Yahweh has been *eliminated* as a result of the reduction ("explained away") so that one encounters a denial of the existence of the religious object in the sense of the described phenomenon itself (cf. Churchland 1981:67–69).

As for the issue of whether a successful identification of the reference of Yahweh as religious object is identification proper or elimination, philosophers of science might suggest it can be one or both (cf. Korman 2009:42–69). A correct identification may lead to the elimination of a superimposed theological meaning or the reification of an anachronistic phenomenon within the meta-language. If this involves "explaining away" it will be the outcome of identification, not the agenda or intention, which most certainly will involve reductionism rather than reduction of Yahweh as religious object. The same fallacy is committed when attempting to "save the phenomena" at all costs. This means the reduction will fail, not simply because of theological reductionism, but due to a failure to bracket anachronistic post-biblical Judeo-Christian philosophical conceptions of divinity (see Duhem 1969).

A SYNTHESIS OF REDUCTIVE META-LANGUAGE ACCOUNTS

On closer inspection, any claim of what Yahweh was or is assumed to be cannot avoid being reductive (implicit already in Sklar 1967:109–124). By this is meant that there is an ineradicable oversimplification involved as a result of having to adopt a particular perspective resulting from the utilisation of a specific interpretative methodology and the meta-language it allows one to formulate one's findings in:

1. If one looks at Yahweh from a religious-historical perspective, the object will appear as a primitive idea with a mysterious origin and an evolutionary development, e.g., the early version of what "God" used to be.

2. If one looks at Yahweh from a literary perspective, the religious object will be reduced to a character in a story and therefore appear as a literary construct, e.g., a fictional object.

3. If one looks at Yahweh from a social-scientific perspective, the deity will come across reductively as a cultural construct of a particular social context, e.g., clan/familial, village, tribal/state, etc.

4. If one looks at Yahweh from a psychological perspective, the religious object will be reductively construed as an epiphenomenon of mental processes, e.g., the imagination, neurosis, projection.

5. If one looks at Yahweh from a theological perspective, the deity will be reduced to a preferred profile of "God" in later Christian dogmatics.

The explanatory value of this assessment can be seen in its potential to make sense of any other reductive account of Yahweh as religious object. For example, if one looks at Yahweh from a linguistic perspective, the religious object is reduced to the name and the various linguistic issues related to it, e.g., grammar, semantics, pragmatics. Alternatively, if one looks at Yahweh from a philosophical perspective, the particular philosophical school, jargon, theory, and period involved will determine what gets constructed and why, along with any value judgments in relation thereto, e.g., the will to power (Nietzsche), a sign (structuralism), etc.

Given this predictive potential of the hypothesis, it should be readily apparent that any attempt to state the actual nature and ontological status of Yahweh in any given meta-language will always betray, by way of the jargon employed, the limited perspective from which it operates and where it may or may not apply. In other words, even where a given point of view's reductive description may be correct within the particular methodological framework, there is no room for any totalising pretences without committing the fallacy of reductionism.

CONCLUSION

From these findings it is clear that all available constructions of what Yahweh actually is offer us at best a relative identity. That is, ideas are always expressed in the particularistic conceptual framework of the meta-language of a method-specific perspective on the matter. By locating the conceptual background of the content of the featured second-order discourse, any description, as well as its explanatory scope, can thus be appropriately assessed. This in turn explains why Yahweh has not and cannot but be seen and construed as the particular theoretical phenomenon the religious object

appears to be from the perspective provided by the particular auxiliary discipline in biblical scholarship.

In those cases where the given perspective assumes itself to be both correct and sufficiently exhaustive, the fallacy of reductionism is present. Reduction as such, however, is neither per se problematic nor avoidable. Awareness of the heuristic limitations incumbent on totalising reductive explanations generated by methodological specificity will allow future inquiries to detect instances of oversimplification in any construction of the religious object in any given meta-language. It will also temper the optimism involved in dreaming of a (unified) theory of everything related thereto.

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