

Philosophical Engagement With the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: Some Methodological Reflections

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cbr**Arthur Keefer** 

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Abstract

A raft of recent “philosophical” interpretations have emerged within biblical studies. They have in common the expectation that ideas from the discipline of philosophy will be helpful for understanding the biblical texts. However, the way in which they engage the two varies, and it is their methods that are teased out in this article. I offer a simple trajectory of approaches for works in this area, marked by two ends of characteristic disciplinary habits: using the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for philosophical reflection and using philosophy for biblical interpretation. In this, the article sketches a much-needed research profile for a lively subdiscipline.

Keywords

biblical criticism, biblical philosophy, exegesis, Hebrew Bible, methodology, Old Testament, philosophical criticism, philosophical engagement, philosophy

Introduction

A recent raft of “philosophical” interpretations has emerged within biblical studies. The book of Job has been interpreted via Aristotelian notions of friendship (Vesely 2019), Ecclesiastes read alongside Benatar’s “anti-natal” premises (Peterson 2019), Proverbs put in touch with Socratic and Aristotelian moral theories (Ansberry 2010; Keefer 2021), and the book of Exodus analyzed with the epistemology of Polanyi (Johnson 2013), to name only a few. The prospect of using philosophical resources for biblical interpretation has, furthermore, been a matter of exploration at several research venues, including the Herzl

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Institute in Jerusalem, the “Hebrew Bible and Philosophy” sessions of the 2014–2015 SBL Annual Meetings, the Logos Institute for Analytic and Exegetical Theology in St. Andrews, Scotland, “The Origins of Second Order Thinking” research venture headed up by Dietrich and others, and the Center for Hebraic Thought, based at The King’s College in New York City, which serves as the current online hub of such efforts. Within these venues, scholars contribute from several belief-based starting points, including Jewish, Christian, and secular stances, as well as several disciplinary starting points, whether biblical studies, theology, political philosophy, or moral philosophy. No publication, to my knowledge, is currently dedicated to these types of inquiries, though several have featured them, including the Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Biblical Criticism series (Johnson 2018), the (discontinued) *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture*, and the journal *Faith and Philosophy*. In 2012, Gericke dubbed “philosophical criticism” a new subdiscipline in biblical studies, so known as “a descriptive type of philosophical analysis aimed at the clarification of meaning in the biblical texts” (Gericke 2012: 201). Gericke envisions his work as not simply “bringing to bear philosophical ideas on the text” but as actually “doing philosophy,” something that many but not all scholars in this domain will endeavor.

While distinctive approaches have emerged, what all these recent efforts have in common is the expectation that ideas from the discipline of philosophy will be helpful for understanding the Bible. As one example, Johnson (2018) uses notions of first- and second-order thinking to disclose how “knowing” and “error” occur within the textual worlds of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Such efforts also fulfill that expectation by using philosophy in a way that is deliberate and self-aware, even if not consistent. For the method with which scholars use philosophy varies—and those methods are something I hope to tease out in this article—but the questions at stake are shared (cf. Cauchi and Kulak 2015): Is the Bible a work of philosophy? Does it contribute to philosophical questions? Can philosophy be used as an interpretive aid within biblical scholarship, and if so, how? On these queries, outspoken supporters and practitioners have said their piece, afresh, and while critics have been less vocal at this point, such responses are sure to come.

The present survey will reserve itself for those efforts at an open, somewhat self-aware engagement of philosophy and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (with occasional references to work being done on the New Testament as well). This includes philosophers who make use of the biblical texts and biblical interpreters who make use of philosophy. As my allusion to Calvin and Spinoza suggests, such engagement has a long pedigree, and one much older than those two men. However, I must concentrate on recent developments in the field, a choice at once regrettable and prudent given the rich history of evidence relevant to this topic (see Sæbø 1996–2015). This article, then, shall introduce readers to the present state of play on a longstanding discussion about the relationship between philosophy and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Referring to the use of philosophy in biblical interpretation, Schmid (2019: 38) remarks that “This type of inquiry appears to prosper in more recent times, though it has yet to produce a clear research profile.” I, therefore, hope to draw up one such profile for this lively, perennial field of study.

In what follows, I will trace a trajectory of approaches, beginning with two sides of a spectrum: “using the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for philosophical reflection” (Antony 2011; Chrétien 2015; Craig 2020; Fales 2011; Murphy 2011; Wood 2021) and “using philosophy for biblical interpretation” (Gericke 2012; Hazony 2012; Johnson 2021; Keefer 2021; Legaspi 2018; Stump 2010; Vesely 2019; Yoder 2020). The former often features those trained in philosophy or in Christian theology, while the latter often features biblical scholars who draw on philosophy. I first explain this typology of approaches in more detail and then survey works on both ends of the spectrum. Scholars on the philosophical side prioritize methods and concepts from philosophical disciplines when reflecting upon biblical material, and they do so with varying degrees of “analytic” and “continental” methodology (I use these terms in their broadest senses). The other end of the spectrum engages philosophy as a resource, with the final goal of better understanding the biblical text. I will suggest that one of the main ways to distinguish between these two approaches is to appreciate the distinctive assumptions they hold about interpreting the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and, thus, the expectations with which they read it. As the following survey will demonstrate, scholars draw on philosophy from within a number of contexts—philosophical, religious, theological, and biblical studies—illustrating that the intersection of the study of philosophy, religion, theology, and biblical studies has much to offer. While contributions have stemmed from those of varied faith and ideological commitments, much of the research produced in recent years has come from Christian philosophers and biblical scholars, which should be evident in what follows. This article, then, primarily focuses on philosophical engagement with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, although it also engages with some scholars who work across the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testament.

Modes of Philosophical Engagement

Typologies are easy to dream up but difficult to perfect. This is all the more true when the subject allows so much room for variability. Using philosophy to interpret the Bible has certainly produced a plurality of approaches, and so my organization is only meant to be heuristic. To that end, and at such an early stage of assessing the field, I propose a simple trajectory of approaches, marked by two ends of characteristic disciplinary habits.

In what I would term “using the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for philosophical reflection,” one end of the spectrum features the tools and aims of philosophical disciplines when engaging the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. This end of the spectrum most often involves work by philosophers who incorporate the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and give some priority to the techniques and language of philosophy. With this approach, there can be a rigidity with which philosophical questions and categories are put to the biblical texts, while literary and historical contexts appear less important. This can especially occur when analytic philosophers make use of biblical texts in the midst of their philosophical arguments. A selection of contributions from the volume *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (Bergmann, Murray, and Rea 2011) will receive extensive discussion in this respect, as philosophers interpret biblical passages with concepts from philosophy while holding to the “literal” sense of such texts. Also

characteristic of philosophical approaches to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and/or New Testament, although different from the preceding, is when biblical literature serves as a springboard for further philosophical reflection. The aim is not so much to interpret the biblical texts but to use them as a muse, an illustration, a starting point for some philosophically related discussion. Kierkegaard (1843) is perhaps the posterchild for this mode, as he retells the story of Genesis 22 throughout *Fear and Trembling*, filling in the narrative gaps with possibilities, with the goal of exploring theological ethics and religious psychology.

The other end of the spectrum, which I label “using philosophy for biblical interpretation,” prioritizes biblical exegesis and employs philosophy in service of that endeavor. It may take philosophical concepts and compare them to biblical concepts, or draw up heuristic categories from philosophy while still trying to interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament on its own terms. In one form, it is a sort of balancing act between philosophical investigation and biblical interpretation, one that admittedly prizes the techniques and tools of biblical exegesis before those of philosophy. However, were one tipped off the biblical side of that balancing act, then we would have the independent results of biblical exegesis brought to bear on otherwise philosophical topics. What really characterizes this mode of engagement, though, is the use of philosophy for literary and historically contextualized interpretation of the biblical texts, most often by those trained in biblical interpretation. As will become clear, when it comes to recent attempts at drawing up a method of philosophical engagement with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, such theories tend to settle near this end of the spectrum: using philosophy to reflect along with the biblical texts, or philosophy in the service of exegesis. It should also become clear that the sort of expectations scholars place upon the biblical texts, especially with respect to the generalizability of its statements and ideas, and the significance of its literary and historical contexts, is perhaps the determinant factor for where any given study lands along this trajectory of philosophical engagement.

Using the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for Philosophical Reflection

Scholars on the philosophical side of the scale prioritize methods and concepts from philosophical disciplines when reflecting upon biblical material. They often consult the Bible as a source, even the primary source, for philosophical discussion and read it with the tools and techniques of philosophy. The obvious practitioners are those involved with philosophy of religion and well-versed in analytic philosophy, and along those lines I discuss several contributions from the 2011 *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, edited by Bergmann, Murray, and Rea. Also helpful for conceptualizing this end of the trajectory are Craig’s (2020) *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration*, Wood’s (2021) discussion of analytic theology in *Analytic Theology and the Study of Religion*, and the more reflective, even devotional, philosophical style of Chrétien’s (2015) *Under the Gaze of the Bible*. The research profile of using the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for philosophical reflection is not as clear-cut as its converse, using philosophy to interpret the biblical texts, and so the

works selected here are intended to represent the defining features of the former rather than to present a cohesive subdiscipline.

With many contributors of an analytic persuasion and well-versed in philosophy of religion, the volume *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (Bergmann, Murray, and Rea 2011) showcases how a cohort of scholars use biblical texts for philosophical reflection. The 19 contributors are mainly philosophers and philosophical theologians, except for three biblical scholars, and the volume contains ten essays, with responses, that stem from a conference conducted in 2009 at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame. The volume puts forward a collection of views on how to address biblical texts that have often been deemed morally problematic, especially those on war and *herem* in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, as they have a bearing on the character of God. The solutions offered revolve around the question of the divine inspiration of the biblical texts—or lack thereof—and their level of moral authority, while the overall approach calls upon two disciplines: philosophy of religion and biblical interpretation.

To justify their interdisciplinary task, the editors appeal, on the one hand, to the “distinctively philosophical” nature of the questions that such passages generate and, on the other hand, to the “awareness of and sensitivity to relevant facts about ancient Near Eastern religion and culture” (p. 4) that the answers require. However, in their estimation, the multi-disciplinary work is not yet complete:

Despite the interdisciplinary character of the questions, however, philosophers have not been rushing to address the issue; and scholars in biblical studies seem (to us, anyway) not to have addressed the crucial philosophical questions with the kind of thoroughness, directness, philosophical sensitivity, and rigor that philosophers of religion might otherwise hope for. (p. 4)

“Thoroughness, directness, philosophical sensitivity, and rigor”—such expectations, according to these scholars, have not been found among the work of biblical interpreters who attempt to address philosophical issues, and so, in an attempt to redress the omission, these characteristics are unsurprisingly evident in this collection of essays. What emerges are scholars engaging the biblical texts with the habits of modern analytic philosophy, sometimes rigorous and thorough, certainly direct, and yet also suited to additional descriptions. The engagement can also be characterized by particular academic conventions: arguing in terms of “claims,” prizing visibly deductive logic, and granting thought experiments a high level of rhetorical authority, for example. Perhaps most important are the expectations that these scholars place upon the biblical texts: that they hold to a fairly high standard of clarity and can therefore answer philosophical questions in a way that might satisfy a philosopher of religion; likewise, that one can query the biblical texts at great length without attending to literary norms or historical context. Although such tendencies may not define every philosopher’s approach to engaging with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, or be exclusive to such an approach, they do distinguish this style of engagement, perhaps more than the “thoroughness, directness, philosophical sensitivity, and rigor that philosophers of religion might otherwise hope for.” Thus, certain

philosophical tools and techniques, and to a greater extent certain expectations with which one reads the Bible, place scholars near the philosophical end of the scale: using the biblical texts for philosophical reflection.

To cite a few examples, consider the chapter by Murphy, “God Beyond Justice” (2011: 150-67), in which he queries the goodness of God in view of “the massacre of the Jerichoites by the army of the Lord” (p. 150). Murphy frames his discussion in terms of “two claims concerning God’s treatment of the Jerichoites: 1. God *acted wrongly with respect to* the Jerichoites in the destruction of Jericho. 2. God *wronged* the Jerichoites in the destruction of Jericho” (p. 152; italics original). He proceeds to argue that while the first does not necessarily entail the second, the second does entail the first; and yet the second is, in the end, implausible, for reasons set out below. Even within its first pages, this chapter shows philosophical rigor in all its strength: precise, clear, explicit, making non-obvious distinctions thanks to an analytic mode of thought and to categories gleaned from philosophical scholarship, in this case, theories of wrongdoing and of justice (see pp. 157-63). Present too is a minor thought experiment, that aligns the sharing of a dikaiological order with cooperation when playing games (p. 161) and exclusive attention given to a literal “set of assertions” from the biblical text rather than “various hermeneutical maneuvers” toward it (pp. 150-151). This is not to say that an approach to the topic from the discipline of biblical studies would be imprecise, vague, and implicit in its argumentation, or that it would falter before the idea that the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament puts forth “a set of assertions, to be construed literally” regarding God (p. 151). But it would not, I think, frame its approach to the topic in such a way, not at least with the combination of techniques that Murphy employs when seeking to answer profound theological questions.

Murphy comes to the intriguing conclusion that God did not wrong the Jerichoites. For to do so God would have needed to enter into a “cooperative” relationship with them, by which Murphy claims that God “enters into the human form of justice” (p. 165). But God does not enter into a cooperative relation with the Jerichoites. God does, however, enter into one with the people of Israel. In other words, argues Murphy, it is coherent to say that God can wrong the Israelites, because God has entered into a particular form of relationship with them, one that entails being “faithful” and “subject[ing] himself to justice norms” as a form of cooperation (p. 165). Murphy describes a privileged relationship between God and Israel, one of “cooperation” and “bipolar normativity,” even “faithfulness” (p. 165), and yet a certain use of biblical language does not appear within this discussion, namely, that of “covenant.” That concept, I think, is precisely what Murphy is rightly getting at with alternative language. While this omission of biblical language does not necessarily damage the argument, it does demonstrate the distance that this mode of engagement has from the lexicon of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the text’s historical context. The role of Jericho in the biblical storyline, Hebrew language for wrongdoing and justice, the conceptual resources used to distinguish God’s relationship with Israel from God’s relationship with the Jerichoites (i.e., covenant)—all of these are part and parcel of explaining the Jericho story and God’s action therein within biblical studies. However, they find no place within Murphy’s philosophically sophisticated discussion of that controversial passage, thus highlighting one of the differences between

using the Bible for philosophical reflection and using philosophy for biblical interpretation.

Further highlighting such a difference, an alternative to Murphy appears in another chapter of the volume, one by biblical theologian Seitz. He opens by questioning the very aim of the volume: “A confession at the outset. I am not persuaded it is possible to *justify* the ways of God, though *speaking of God rightly* . . . is something both desirable and possible. At issue is whether the Bible is competent to do that in its canonical shape and intention” (Seitz 2011: 292; italics original). Seitz’s contribution turns on the question of what expectations the Bible is designed to meet, and one senses that there will be severe limitations for the volume’s task in this regard. He argues that the character of God is bound to the “twofold witness” of Christian Scripture (p. 293), so that if one wishes to understand what the Bible has to say about God then one needs to account for the entirety of the canon, whether it be Jewish or Christian. Seitz articulates this understanding of scripture in order to combat a piecemeal reading of biblical texts that deals in “assertions about individual statements” (p. 293) rather than passages in a larger context. With this, he delineates two objects of study: “a canonical scripture whose form is essential to proper appreciation, or a neutral text with an assemblage of independent assertions about God made at this or that moment, as products of human imagination and self-assertion” (p. 300). He spends the remainder of the chapter interpreting God’s command of military conquest within the larger context of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (pp. 300-308). While Seitz clearly states what he himself might expect from the Bible and, I think, accurately identifies a tendency among how many of the philosophers in the volume approach it, Murphy’s comes with certain expectations too, and yet the latter gives first and final voice to philosophy, its techniques, language, and discursive frame.

Also, and more advantageously, the priority given to philosophical texts and certain concepts of the discipline can force unprecedented questions upon interpreters and thereby procure new insights into the biblical text. For example, another chapter in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, written by Antony and entitled “Does God Love Us?” (Antony 2011: 29-46) argues, based on Genesis 3, 22, and the book of Job, that God is not the loving father that he is often claimed to be. Antony’s charge that “God almost never explains to his children *why* he demands of them the things he does” (Antony 2011: 39; italics original) may inspire biblical scholars to investigate the rationale behind divine commands, even when that rationale seems absent from the text. Some modes of biblical interpretation are committed to “being silent where the text is silent,” but philosophical approaches illuminate the exegetical advantages of entertaining such questions, especially those that seem standard for philosophers. Among other things, it can cause one to question easily accepted solutions within biblical interpretation, which can form a solidified tradition to which biblical scholars might acquiesce. That God could have been wrong to command what he did regarding the Jerichoites, for instance, is not an automatic judgment for some theologians and biblical scholars, not least because of a calcified tradition of interpretation. Plausibility aside, the philosophical tradition may challenge readings of the biblical studies tradition, which is one feature of works on this side of the spectrum.

With such advantages, though, come corresponding hazards. I mentioned above the demands that this mode of engagement can place upon the biblical text, which some might find reasonable, and others overdone. Also within *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, Fales (2011) critiques attempts to defend “morally repugnant” passages about God found in the Christian Bible, mainly those revolving around murder, such as the destruction of the Canaanites, Genesis 22, and New Testament atonement, and argues that the only successful defenses are those based on theological voluntarism, where God’s will serves as the primary moral authority. Fales situates that acceptance of voluntarism, more commonly known as divine command theory, through an adherence to biblical revelation, which he broaches via the seventeenth-century philosopher Locke.

As a part of this argument, Fales deals with substitutionary atonement, which offers a fine example of such hermeneutical hazards:

Substitution theories of vicarious atonement must do three things: explain how sin creates an obligation that is transferable—can be met on one’s behalf by someone else—explain why that debt is beyond the sinner’s means to pay, and explain how the cross can discharge that obligation. (Fales 2011: 102)

That one should find the mechanics of atonement within the Pauline corpus of the New Testament with the clarity and precision that Fales insinuates seems unlikely. His additional distinction between “*legal penalty*” and “*moral guilt*” (p. 102; italics original) compounds the issue, demanding a level of forensic analysis that the Bible just might not disclose. On the one hand, this again broaches the role of biblical language and context for addressing interpretive questions: in this case theories of “federal headship,” corporate guilt, and the possibility that Paul uses legal imagery to convey a moral reality. On the other hand, a biblical scholar may simply be more comfortable with interpretive ambiguity than a philosopher of religion will be. Regardless, if one is interested in arguments that tend towards finality and eliminate ambiguity, it can be found among the philosophical approaches outlined here.

The interchange of philosophy and the biblical texts has a relative going by the name of “analytic theology,” which is demonstrated in Wood’s (2021) *Analytic Theology and the Study of Religion*. Wood is Professor of Philosophical Theology, interested in the relationship between philosophy and theology, and a specialist in medieval theology and Christian doctrine. Wood (2021: 3, 13) describes the task of analytic theology as one that “uses the tools and methods of analytic philosophy” to elucidate “the meaning, coherence, and truth of Christian doctrines.” Wood makes two observations that seem pertinent for the use of philosophy under discussion here. First, he contrasts analytic theology with other “humanistic disciplines,” pitting the contrast as one of constructive thought versus historical and exegetical accounts (pp. 11-12). The former features “direct assertions of one’s own view about reality, often in propositional form, and direct contradictions of alternative views” (p. 12; see also p. 194). That articulates the style that I have been describing so far and is, interestingly and, I think, rightly, contrasted with an historical-exegetical mode of argumentation.

Second, Wood also broaches a related matter; namely, the type of evidence and argumentation deemed suitable for certain questions (see pp. 193-205). It becomes a charged matter of debate for him when expounding six norms for “legitimate academic argument” (p. 198) and assessing them within Hasker’s (2013) *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*. Hasker argues that trinitarian statements such as “The Father is God” are predications of a property rather than claims about identity, and he makes the case, according to Wood, both “logically” and “exegetically” (p. 207). The latter appeals to John 1:1 where “the Word was God,” which Hasker takes to be a predicate adjectival use of the word *theos* (God), propping up his case for deity as a predicated attribute. Hasker’s argumentation itself offers an example of using the Christian Bible for (philosophically) theological inquiry, and yet Wood’s assessment of it offers even more insight into the interdisciplinary distinctions with which I’m concerned.

Wood suggests that Hasker’s argument from John turns on philology more than anything else and so he pursues a query of method involving historical contingencies, as recorded in the Christian Bible or manifest in Christian creeds, on the one hand, and “theological claims about Christ” on the other (p. 212). Thus, a mighty rift is rent between history and theology—they are two very different types of evidence and require different responses for cogency. I belabor Wood’s contention with Hasker because it gives some validity to the spectrum of styles with which scholars intertwine the biblical texts and philosophy, especially the far philosophical end. Although the use of the biblical texts in theology and philosophically informed theology opens us to another set of disciplines entirely, which will not feature here, several shared interdisciplinary concerns are at play.

As for the precision, rigor, and clarity upon which analytic disciplines are based, the point, again, is not that biblical scholars never argue with premises and conclusions but that they rarely argue in those explicit terms or display their arguments with such visible logic, never mind the idea of employing ideal language notation to discover matters of biblical exegesis (see Johnson 2021: 275-276). The hallmarks of biblical scholarship are, rather, philological commentary on the text, an historically and literarily informed explanation of it, and an ordinary language argument that aims at interpretive plausibility more than a coherent presentation of logic that results in a single conclusion. It also seems that there is something universal, perhaps unconditioned, about the premises used in such philosophical reflection, leaving a certain distance from history that biblical interpreters would not automatically grant.

That takes us to another category of works on the philosophical side of the spectrum, a side that altogether should not be characterized simply as “analytic” or some such type. Philosophical engagement can use the Bible not as an object of systematic analysis so much as a springboard for philosophical discussion. It muses, takes inspiration, begins with the text, and often ends up somewhere very different. It can be discursive in form and, as some will wish to say, fit the mold of “continental philosophy.”

At least one relatively recent work engages the Christian Bible in this way. Chrétien’s (2015) *Under the Gaze of the Bible*, part of a series called Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, is a collection of eight essays, or meditations, on themes such as joy and hope and on the authority of the Christian Scriptures. Chrétien was a French philosopher who worked in phenomenology and the Christian-Platonic tradition. The opening pages of

Under the Gaze of the Bible, for instance, riff on references to “today” in Heb. 3.13 in order to explore the meaning of time. A chapter entitled “The Wisdom Learned at the Foot of the Cross” begins with a broad comparison of Greek philosophical wisdom and Israelite experiential wisdom. By the end, through a meditation on Paul, Augustine, Aquinas and the distinction between spiritual gifts of knowledge, wisdom and intelligence, Chrétien’s volume develops a discursive exposition of Christian wisdom. Chrétien also includes a chapter on Kierkegaard and expresses an unanchored approach to the text that is similar to Kierkegaard’s itself: “all of [the essays] proceed from listening to the Word for which one is never prepared, and still less armed, a Word for which one cannot wait on firm footing, for it is only when one vacillates in order to find through it another foundation that one discovers it has come” (p. xi). Chrétien retains a self-reflective hermeneutic that moves from subject to subject, and he seems quite comfortable with the polyphony of meanings in the Christian Bible. This, and other works of the sort (e.g., [Lacocque and Ricoeur 1998](#); [Lacocque 2020](#)), revel in the multiplicity of meaning in biblical texts, often fronting intertextuality as a main mode of interpretation. When paired with an illustrative, touch-point approach to the biblical texts, it may become no less philosophical but certainly less analytic than its partner on this end of the trajectory. Chrétien ultimately maintains a mode of philosophical engagement with the Christian Bible that takes inspiration from the text in order to discuss his philosophical interests, however circuitously (see also [Burggraeve 2020](#)).

Were we to return to the more analytic style and yet move slightly inwards along that trajectory, away from the mode of engagement found in a volume like Bergmann, Murray, and Rea’s then we would find a work like [Craig’s \(2020\) *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration*](#). Craig approaches the subject, especially as developed within Reformed theology, as an analytic philosopher. While the work is wide-ranging, he deals with Hebrew Bible/Old Testament texts such as Isaiah 53 and more briefly with passages that inform topics like sacrifice and divine justice. As the title makes clear, Craig explores the Christian theology of the atonement from three perspectives, one of which is philosophical. He ultimately aims to articulate a theory of the atonement that is “both biblically and philosophically coherent” (p. viii), so the philosophical perspective consequently shapes an entire third of his argument, which incorporates philosophy of law to analyze several topics related to penal substitution. His use of philosophy here provides an evaluative framework for God’s role in the atonement, allowing him to account for conceptions of punishment, responsibility, and legal fiction in his theory. That theory of penal substitution is consequently framed as “coherent” (p. 149), since it accounts for other aspects of atonement theory and soteriology, as disclosed by philosophy of law. As the title also suggests, Craig does not shy from discussing biblical language or employing the tools of biblical exegesis, and yet at times he takes a decidedly philosophical approach to those texts due to, among other things, his use of the jurisprudential philosophical framework. His use of philosophy, then, might be described as philosophy in the service of systematic theology, which is why I locate his book closer to the philosophy side of the spectrum than the biblical interpretation side.

This side of the trajectory—using the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for philosophical engagement—operates with a variety of tools and techniques, but it seems that those tools

and techniques stem from the world of philosophy, whether that be analytic or continental, to use two fairly crude categories (see [Gericke 2016](#), especially pp. 87-90). Perhaps of more significance are the ways in which these scholars handle the biblical texts. For they can tend to overlook the literary and historical contexts of biblical literature and yet do so in very different ways: some extract textual assertions as apparently timeless points about God, giving full weight to philosophical questions and expectations, as if biblical texts mean only one thing, unaffected by historical location (e.g., [Murphy 2011](#); [Fales 2011](#)); others suggest that the biblical texts would never mean one thing and revel in the plurality of textual and intertextual interpretations (e.g., [Chrétien 2015](#); [Seitz 2011](#)).

Although this article aims to describe and explain with minimal evaluation, it is worth mentioning that there have been criticisms against such uses of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament for philosophy for some time now. Observing biblical theology from the middle of the 20th century, Gericke regards the field as anti-philosophical:

Old Testament theologies after the middle of the century began to make a point of emphasizing that the Hebrew Bible is not philosophical in its concerns and that one looks in vain for neat philosophical definitions or systems in it. It was also endlessly insinuated that philosophical questions put to the text were hermeneutically illegitimate, and that philosophical reflection on ancient Israelite religion had no place in Old Testament theology: ‘Much has been said about the imposition of the categories of Greek philosophy on the Bible, and the consequent distortion of the Bible’. (2012: 67; citing [McKenzie 1976](#): 25)

Biblical scholars have long been wary of certain modes of philosophical engagement with the Bible, although interdisciplinary proposals for this type of approach do seem to be gaining acceptance. Gericke himself has responded to such wariness with a program of “philosophical criticism” (2012) and with his more recent analysis of philosophical theology (2020). However, in addition to raising awareness of a longstanding skepticism towards philosophical approaches to the Bible, what I have tried to draw out here are some of the characteristics of this mode of reflection, including their advantages and their potential variance from certain forms of biblical interpretation.

Using Philosophy for Biblical Interpretation

It should be clear by now that modes of philosophical engagement with the Bible depend a great deal on the principle academic discipline of the writer. Many of those mentioned above would identify as philosophers of some sort, and anyone familiar with the analytic-continental divide will sense that such a distinction might apply to those styles of philosophical engagement with the Bible (see [Gericke 2016](#)). Certain distinctions within the language and forms of logic might also apply, but the modes of reflection that I am proposing should not be forced to mirror those categories. They may be similar, but I intend no identification between philosophical modes of reflection, or a spectrum of engagement, and those divisions of method or theory within philosophical disciplines.

The other end of the trajectory, what I call “using philosophy for biblical interpretation,” contains elements of the modes and styles described above. However, as with the

preceding, its distinctiveness depends a great deal on what it expects from and how it handles biblical interpretation, along with the role of philosophical texts and concepts in relation to this. Works on this end of the spectrum have begun to form no less than a subdiscipline within biblical studies, blazing a trail with a methodological effort unseen in the works discussed so far.

That this mode of reflection should be deliberate about its methodology is understandable. For it aims, on the one hand, to preserve some fixed contextual meaning from the text. Biblical literature meant something, perhaps many things, to its original authors and audiences, and that meaning is disclosed through an account of the historical and social contexts, as well as the situation of the text's earliest known recipients. As speculative as this endeavor must, at times, be, the broad mission of critical biblical study lies at the heart of this mode of philosophical reflection. In other words, the expectations that are placed upon the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament differ, to some degree, from those nearer the philosophical end of the spectrum. On the other hand, this mode brings philosophical ideas and texts into conversation with contextually determined readings of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Phenomenological epistemologies, Greek theories of virtue, and Scholastic notions of wisdom are compared with biblical texts. And deliberate effort is made here—not always successfully—in both directions: first, to avoid imposing those philosophical ideas onto the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and second, to set some controls on the meaning of the biblical texts. “Using philosophy for biblical interpretation,” in this way, marks its own place along the trajectory.

Generally critical, supportive, and integrative in its use of philosophy for biblical interpretation, this mode employs philosophical texts and concepts in the service of biblical exegesis, often in a comparative or heuristic style. It could thus be named “philosophical reflection with the Bible”—in other words, a means by which scholars might reflect philosophically while also attending to the historical and literary nature of the biblical texts. Recent works of this style come in two forms: discrete studies and meta-commentary, although the two are sometimes blended. The first includes works such as [Stump's \(2010\) *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*](#), [Vesely's \(2019\) *Friendship and Virtue Ethics in the Book of Job*](#), and my own (2021) *The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics: Integrating the Biblical and Philosophical Traditions*, as well as [Legaspi's \(2018\) *Wisdom in Classical and Biblical Tradition*](#) and [Yoder's \(2020\) *Tanakh Epistemology*](#). Despite their commonality, these studies are doing quite distinctive things.

Discrete Studies That Use Philosophy to Interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Stump is an accomplished philosopher, with interests ranging from Aquinas to the problem of suffering and nature of Christian atonement. Her *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* has become a touchstone of sorts for work in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and philosophy area, and for scholars on both sides of the spectrum. This lengthy work comes in at 668 pages, and exhibits Stump's expertise on Thomas Aquinas and philosophical theology, along with her sincere engagement with

biblical literature. In terms of scholarship, it certainly leans towards the philosophical, for little reference is made to research produced in biblical studies or of the norms in that discipline. But that, in my judgment, does not compromise her interpretation of the biblical texts, which should strike biblical specialists as plausible and thought provoking in many cases. As a whole, the study addresses the “problem of evil” in terms of “the problem of suffering,” and Stump utilizes Thomist theodicy along with the biblical stories of Job, Samson, Abraham, and Mary of Bethany. Overall, she makes the case that suffering can be remedied through personal relationships of love. Stump frames the problem of suffering as a philosophical one via Thomistic theodicy and she addresses that problem via biblical narratives, each of which contributes something distinctive to the question of suffering even if the approach taken to each is relatively similar.

As one example of how Stump weds philosophy and biblical texts, we might look to her chapter on “The Story of Abraham: Desires of the Heart.” There, she takes narrative seriously, for lack of a better word, and reads the Abrahamic story as a single, integrated tale about a patriarch’s desires told through faith, fear, and suffering (2010: 258-307). “I will argue,” she says, “that faith of the sort exemplified by Abraham consists not in detachment from the desires of one’s heart . . . but rather in trust in the goodness of God to fulfill those desires” (p. 259). Stump engages Kierkegaard’s famous interpretation of Abraham alongside a sensitive reading of the biblical text that weds attention to its composite literary nature with its character- and drama-driven theology. What emerges in this chapter is an innovative reading of Genesis 22, informed by Genesis 12–21, and a nuanced understanding of the nature of Abraham’s suffering and response to it. Innovative, on the one hand, is her reading of the Abraham narrative as an interdependent whole, viewing its characters in a linear development across the course of the text. On the other hand, that reading maps the selfhood and relationships of those characters with resources from medieval philosophy, particularly Aquinas’ notions of desire and love, and within later philosophical discussions of Genesis, namely, Kierkegaard’s. Stump engages philosophy by reflecting along with the Bible, despite her starting point in philosophical theology and scarce engagement with formal biblical scholarship.

Vesely, a Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholar with strong interests in Christian ethics, moves us one step closer to formal biblical scholarship and seems slightly more analytic than Stump in her use of philosophical resources. She uses Aristotelian virtue ethics, particularly its taxonomy of friendship and “emphasis on dispositions, intentions, and perceptions” (2019: 7) in order to disclose aspects of the book of Job not previously noticed. Her work is also informed by [MacIntyre \(1984\)](#) and [Birch \(1991\)](#). Most of all, her exegesis of Job makes use of external ethical categories for analysis, such as Aristotle’s three types of friends, while also attending to Job’s own categories (e.g., *hesed*; pp. 119-121). This enables Vesely to articulate the inner workings of biblical individuals and their relationships with unprecedented detail and nuance. For example, her reading of Job 4:1–7:21 (pp. 107-130) extracts seven virtues as “integral components of genuine friendship . . . most fully revealed in actions of advocacy” (p. 106). The consequence of this analysis, for her, emerges in a reexamination of portions of Job—that is, diachronic implications for understanding views across the book—and also the normative function of Job, in comparison to Greek tragedy. Vesely concludes that virtue ethics offers a valuable perspective on the book of Job that

discloses an underappreciated interpretation of Job's friends—their failure is not only a matter of theology but of character—and an invitation for the moral formation of the text's readers. While more forensic than Stump, Vesely's work is not as regimented as my own will be, where the enumeration and application of philosophical categories is more extensive, nor is its contextual comparison of biblical and philosophical traditions as much of a feature.

My own work on *Proverbs and Virtue Ethics* (2021) places us far along the biblical studies side of the trajectory, and yet with a use of philosophy more forensic than Stump or Vesely. I use the precise criteria of Aristotelian moral virtues and Thomistic theological virtues to see if and how the moral concepts in Proverbs correspond to those criteria, while also attending to the historical contexts of these works for his comparison. The study is analytic in style but also comparative, and constitutes a “use of philosophy for interpreting the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament” thanks to its strict adherence to a contextual interpretation of its sources. I identify 15 moral virtues and all three theological virtues within Proverbs, that is, actions and emotions that correspond to the definitions provided by the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and forms of faith, hope, and love in accordance with Aquinas' works. In that respect, the work is analytic and philosophical, but its discussion of these virtues becomes comparative as it examines the similarities and differences between each respective virtue list.

Aristotle, for instance, showcases the virtue of courage in his *NE* while Proverbs barely mentions the idea or its core emotion, fear (see Keefer 2021: 120-126). Why these treatments differ becomes clear when the socio-historical contexts of each work are accounted for. For example, *NE* might address future statesmen in a world where war was prevalent and military training essential, whereas Proverbs pertains to a largely agrarian population with little experience or need for soldiering, which thus puts courage low on the list for the latter. However, while Proverbs may not champion courage in the way that Aristotle does, its distinct treatment “does not disqualify [courage] from being a moral virtue but does reveal in what ways it is not Aristotelian” (p. 126). Several such virtues are examined in this way, especially those that receive widely distinctive treatments in Proverbs and the *NE* (so honor, shame, humility, pride, courage, work, speech, and friendship). In contrast to courage, work is given abundant attention in Proverbs and takes form as a virtue in “diligence.” Again accounting for the socio-historical and theological contexts of these two works, I conclude that “Proverbs admires and encourages the virtue of diligence within what Aristotle would consider menial labor, because the ethics of Proverbs envisions a life of virtue not within the *polis* of citizens, who strive to be free of labor so they can at most contemplate life and at least serve in noble occupations, but envisions virtue within the ancient Near Eastern agrarian household, among a people whose God had dignified work” (p. 132). The comparison of theological virtues in Proverbs and Thomas Aquinas' work is less historically based and focuses instead on the conceptual elements of faith, hope, and love (pp. 158-200). The gifts of God to humankind, the material or eternal nature of the good, and the relevance of Christian creedal claims all come into play here. In the end, it is the attempt at comprehensive detail and the cultural-historical basis of comparison that sets my work apart among attempts of “using philosophy to interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.”

Like Vesely's *Friendship and Virtue Ethics in the Book of Job*, my *The Book of Proverbs and Virtue Ethics* represents an increasing number of works that focus on discrete philosophical and biblical texts, using the former to interpret the latter while attempting to preserve the integrity of both. Furthermore, as with those who use the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and/or New Testament for philosophical reflection, those who make use of philosophy for biblical interpretation manifest analytic (Peterson 2019; Keefer 2021) and continental (Legaspi 2018; Stump 2010) styles.

Two final publications illuminate the far end of the biblical interpretation side of the spectrum. For while Stump, Vesely, and I retain a schematic approach to philosophy and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (and at times New Testament), seeing these as related but nonetheless separate entities that inform each other in a methodical manner, not all scholars favor such a segregated exchange. For example, Legaspi's (2018) *Wisdom in Classical and Biblical Tradition* (see pp. 1-16) distances itself from such discrete comparisons, which he claims can lead to a distortion of otherwise broader bodies of source material. His work, therefore, aims to "zoom out" (p. 9) and explore a unified yet two-sided classical-biblical tradition of wisdom. Legaspi labors to clarify how such ancient sources are best read together, and he seems comfortable with a level of opaqueness that the works above eschew. Words like "classical" and "biblical," for instance, remain indeterminate in meaning, and despite some relative unity are not entirely commensurate, according to Legaspi. They do, however, find similarity for Legaspi thanks to a larger comparison with modernity, a vantage point that occludes otherwise visible ancient distinctions (see pp. 10-11).

Legaspi places what I have been calling "philosophical engagement with the Bible" along a similar trajectory, which he labels with "schematization and exposition" (2018: 13). The former can be overcooked into "artificiality and oversimplification"; the latter too may reduce texts to a "pointless restatement of their contents" (p. 13). Such is one helpful formulation of the distinction that I have been drawing out over the course of this article, and Legaspi places himself nearer the biblical than the philosophical side of it. Thus, he begins his study with a definition of ancient wisdom and then shows how various texts and figures from the Christian Bible, Jewish antiquity, and ancient Greek world contribute to such an understanding. Homer's epics, Plato's dialogues, Genesis, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Aristobulus, Wisdom of Solomon, along with the New Testament, make up his argument, which is indeed an organic exposition of contents centered on several themes of wisdom: metaphysical, social, cosmic, political, and personal. Those themes are the extent of any "schematization" in Legaspi's work. He otherwise presents a reading of ancient texts that invites the reader to spot patterns or disjunctions, putting *Wisdom in Classical and Biblical Tradition* at the far "biblical" end of using philosophy to interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (and New Testament).

Yoder's (2020) *Tanakh Epistemology* also falls at this far end, with a study of epistemology in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Yoder's overarching concern is to show that the epistemology of the Hebrew Bible need not, and even should not, be determined by the Western philosophical tradition but rather appreciated on its own terms, "as an ancient Semitic epistemic text" (p. 10). He sets his own study over and against certain scholars mentioned in the present article, such as Hazony and Van de Mieroop (pp.

9-10), and furthermore argues that “Tanakh epistemology” informs our understanding of western culture (see pp. 191-264). For half of the monograph, he peruses the book of Daniel, especially Daniel 2, for its conception of knowledge and perception, all with due diligence in philology and ancient Near Eastern contexts, that allows for a prolonged comparison with “modern” conceptions of the same. Hume, Kant, and Descartes all feature here as Yoder argues that Daniel’s understanding of perceptual knowledge does not contradict “philosophy and science” (p. 110). The former gives credence to “visionary observation,” “expert observers,” and revelation that cannot be invalidated by other knowledge programs, especially not modernity’s (see pp. 100-123). Driven by a concentration of lexemes for “know” in Daniel 2, Yoder expands his outlook to other occurrences of the term, as well as “see” and “hear” in a number of select passages from Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and again Daniel (see pp. 124-146). A narrower study of wisdom and knowledge from ancient Greek thinkers and Ecclesiastes then follows, with the final third of the monograph bringing all these findings to bear on modern and postmodern epistemology.

Yoder deals closely with the biblical texts and variously with philosophical works. His contribution to philosophical engagement is not his methodology but rather the intellectual and rhetorical contexts in which his argument is framed. Modernity—largely meaning Spinoza, Hume, and Kant—and postmodernity, premodernity and the Greeks, secular thought, “ancient eastern” thought and the Tanakh: the drama occurs at these sweeping levels of intellectual history, and Yoder’s attitude toward them is not dispassionate. He argues that modernity has misunderstood Tanakh epistemology and that biblical criticism, to the extent that it has been influenced by modern thought, has done likewise (see, e.g., [Yoder 2020](#): 295-303). Overall, he conducts biblical interpretation that then informs historical (mis)appreciation of the biblical texts, putting him also at the “using philosophy for biblical interpretation” end of the spectrum. Were interpretive methodology the distinguishing factor of *Tanakh Epistemology*, then Yoder sets himself apart with a rather unpopular diagnostic for ascertaining the Tanakh’s epistemological axioms, namely, the concentration of lexemes. The works discussed below do not think that vocabulary, on its own, makes a reliable guide to the philosophical world of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; nor are they driven by a single topic of study. However, like Yoder, they have overarching concerns about philosophical engagement with it.

Meta-Commentary on Using Philosophy to Interpret the Bible

Works that engage philosophy and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and/or New Testament without being confined to a discrete theme or single book comment instead on the Bible and philosophy relation as a whole or attempt philosophical interpretations of an entire scriptural canon. [Hazony’s \(2012\) *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*](#), [Gericke’s \(2012\) *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion*](#), and [Johnson’s \(2021\) *Biblical Philosophy: A Hebraic Approach to the Old and New Testaments*](#) all fit this description. Much of the latest research in this subdiscipline has taken inspiration from Hazony and Gericke. [Johnson’s 2021](#) book is, in fact, a response to [Hazony’s 2012](#) publication, while at least one article (see [Peterson 2019](#)) and my own 2021 monograph have used a revised

version of Gericke's methodology. Each of these scholars writes from a different context and focuses on different biblical texts, with their own priorities and slightly different methodological approaches.

To begin, [Gericke's 2012 *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion*](#) offers a definition of "philosophical criticism":

philosophical criticism is understood as a descriptive type of philosophical analysis aimed at the clarification of meaning in the biblical texts. Its aim is to look at the biblical discourse from the perspective of loci on the agenda of philosophy of religion, with an interest in discovering what, if anything, a given passage assumes or implies on these matters and in translating the findings of the analyses into philosophical terms. In this way the folk philosophies of ancient Yahwism can be identified, reconstructed and elucidated. (2012: 201)

Gericke places himself "in a readerly context outside of faith-based scholarship" (p. ix) and approaches the text from a "supermodern" context, which affirms an overabundance of meanings within texts (p. 12-13). The background, essence, and aims of philosophical criticism are made clear by Gericke: it employs concepts from philosophy of religion to descriptively analyze the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and thereby clarify what the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament assumes and implies about said concepts. Theories of epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics, for example, provide resources with which to describe how the Hebrew Bible conceives of their respective concerns, resulting in a portion of biblical literature that is translated into philosophical language. For example, in a discussion about moral realism (pp. 411-420), he examines the nature of ethical language in Genesis and the Psalms, as each makes a claim about what is "good." This broaches matters akin to the Euthyphro dilemma; namely, whether an independent notion of "good" was ascribed to God or whether a person's conception of good derived from God (e.g., Ps. 34.8); Gericke argues for the former (p. 412). The significance of Gericke's work should not be understated, not least its ambition, its promise, and its judicious account of prior relations between philosophy and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (pp. 41-113), which should be at least a helpful resource for anyone interested in the subject.

In practice, Gericke's work bears many of the marks that I have described for the philosophical end of the spectrum. He inclines towards an analytic style in the examples he works out and could at times be seen to impose philosophical categories onto the biblical texts. This, again, remains a matter of how literary, social, and historical contexts, which have been part and parcel of critical biblical interpretation, do and do not come into play when interpreting the text philosophically. In the above example of Psalm 34, for instance, he does not account for certain literary or historical contexts, such as the poetic nature of the psalm's language or the author's and audience's motivation for making or reciting certain ethical claims. Nevertheless, Gericke's methodological proposals sound a great deal like reflecting philosophically "along with" the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. He underscores mutual interaction between the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and philosophy, and prizes the clarification that philosophical resources bring to the non-analytic literature of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. To "think with" the Bible philosophically, for Gericke, means to account for the historical and source-critical conclusions

established in biblical scholarship, especially in contrast to “fundamentalist” positions, like the presumed unity of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament thought (see [Gericke 2012](#): 97-104, 231). His 2012 volume is definitive for the field and contains a generous amount of meta-commentary and historical reflection, paired with several worked-out examples from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament itself.

Hazony offers a nice foil to Gericke’s method. If the latter inclines towards the philosophical side of the trajectory, then the former moves towards the exegetical. Hazony approaches the text from a theological context as a Modern Orthodox Jew. His main concern is to demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible is a work of reason and not only one of revelation. For him, this means that the Hebrew Bible “advance[s] arguments of a universal or general significance” (2012: 23), which are for all people and not only for the people of Israel, and it does so in the areas of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy, each of which he teases out with its own chapter. Hazony’s book warrants the “meta-commentary” label because it is driven by the reason-revelation dichotomy that, he claims, holds modern readings of the entire Hebrew Bible captive. His chapters examine several biblical books and, as mentioned, cover multiple topics of philosophy, all in the service of his overarching interpretive thesis. In chapter 6, for instance, “Jeremiah and the Problem of Knowing,” Hazony opens with Plato’s problem of knowledge and opinion in order to ask: “Did the authors of the Bible concern themselves with such questions?” (p. 161). A study of Jeremiah ensues and, by its end, readers are left with several exegetical insights and a broad comparison with ancient Greek epistemology. According to Hazony, whatever knowledge one can gain does come from experience, and despite the illusions under which Jeremiah’s contemporaries suffer, reality will eventually “overwhelm the false opinions that have held sway for so long” (see, e.g., p. 191). In this way, Jeremiah is much more like Plato than Aristotle, and yet his solution to the problem of human illusion remains distinctive, as human psychology is to blame and reality is singular rather than dualistic (pp. 191-192). Within the discussion, reference is made to “natural law” (pp. 172-177), among other philosophical topics. However, Hazony does this using broad terms rather than according to any specific philosophical exposition; for example his discussion of Jeremiah engages Greek epistemology, specifically Plato’s view of knowledge, and yet the latter receives a short paragraph of description along with a brief, concluding association with epistemic illusion (pp. 161, 191). *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* is not discrete in scope or analytic in method, for philosophers are picked up and then left off; their specific categories do not really control Hazony’s reading of the Hebrew Bible, nor do their respective contexts inform comparison. And yet Hazony does not engage philosophy as a springboard or illustration. For certain philosophical questions govern his argument—the role of natural law (pp. 103-139), the nature of knowledge (p. 161-192), and the meaning of “truth” (pp. 193-218)—and he moves back and forth from those questions to the Bible, engaging the latter in some depth.

Hence, in 2012, we were left with two publications that defined the field, and yet their use of philosophy and handling of the Bible appear quite dissimilar. The popularity of these two works is due, not least, to their overarching proposals of method (Gericke) and purpose (Hazony). Unsurprisingly, certain scholars have attempted a synthesis of these two approaches (see [Carmy and Shatz 1997](#); [Keefer 2021](#); see [Sekine 2005, 2014](#)), while

some have endeavored to advance one of them (see [Johnson 2021](#); [Peterson 2019](#)). As for the latter, Johnson's work (2021) is the most recent and constructive in the field.

Johnson has previously drawn on philosophical resources to probe epistemology and ritual throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testaments (see [Johnson 2013, 2016, 2018](#)), but in *Biblical Philosophy* he attempts to outline the "philosophical style" of the scriptures through a set of six "genetic markers": that is, two modes of argumentation ("pixelated" and "networked") plus four convictions ("mysterionist," "creationist," "transdemographic," and "ritualist") (pp. 82-99). In lay terms, Johnson means that Hebraic literature makes arguments through an ordered presentation of exemplars that are developed across the Christian Bible, so intertextually. Johnson approaches the text from the context of biblical theology which accounts for the Bible as Christian Scripture (p. 18), and yet he uses bespoke phraseology to make his case. "Hebraic literature" seems to be Johnson's preferred way of referring to the Hebrew Bible (pp. 46-47), while "philosophical style" means "that texts collectively reveal a general mode of argument and a set of convictions that enable the particular forms of argument to function" (p. 40). "Hebraic philosophy," then, is the philosophical style found in the Pentateuch that "carries forward into the rest of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament" (p. 46). With this Hebraic style comes four core beliefs: that humans encounter epistemic limits, that God created and sustains the universe, that participation is central, and that people of all social positions—not just a select class—are recipients of this philosophy. Establishing these with Hebrew Bible/Old Testament material, he goes on to argue that the same principles appear in the New Testament, in contrast to certain "NT philosophies" previously proposed by scholars (pp. 181-223). Johnson's prior work has featured epistemology, and this monograph is no exception, but he is getting at something comprehensive and organic about how biblical literature makes arguments in general. He aims to "build a satisfactory heuristic" for such interpretation and eschews philosophy itself as his starting point. Priority, he claims, must be given to the "indigenous philosophy of the Christian Scriptures," for only then can "we begin to put its questions and insights into conversation with other philosophies" (p. 84).

Gericke and Johnson may have similar aims (Gericke's is to do philosophy with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the help of philosophy of religion; Johnson's is to map the philosophical modes of thought and argumentation across the Christian Bible) but they come at the task disparately. Gericke brings philosophical categories to the text, which he then transposes into philosophical language, operating all the while in a non-theological mode that begins and ends with a plurality of textual meanings and discrete biblical texts; Johnson finds within the text something that can then be compared to philosophical ideas, operating within a theological context that values the coherence of Christian Scripture. Hazony's methodology is not entirely clear or consistent, although it also provides an example of meta-commentary on the topic. Taken together, the three works—and the works that they inspire—highlight the various contexts out of which biblical scholars draw upon philosophy as they read and interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (as well as the New Testament). For using philosophy to interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament can occur within very different contexts of belief with distinct

understandings of what the biblical text is and what one might glean from it, and yet these enterprises nevertheless continue to produce a constructive dialogue.

Other Fields of Biblical-Philosophical Study

These comparative efforts should be distinguished from more historically oriented studies that deal with broader arguments about cultural influence, such as the ancient Israelite and Hellenistic and Hebraic worlds (Arieti 2017; Gmirkin 2016) or the indebtedness that modern philosophy has to biblical rather than Greek ideas (Polka 2014). In many of these works one will find a slight apologetic, a suggestion about the origins of philosophy or at least about how that origin story is told. For example, Berman writes, “While ancient Greece is often considered the cradle of modern political thought, the patrimony of modern political thought rests no less squarely in the texts of the Bible, particularly the Pentateuch” (2008: 3). That people in the ancient Near East had something to contribute in this way is an argument also made outside of biblical studies (see Van de Mieroop 2015; Johnson 2021: 50-78). Additionally, Hebrew Bible/Old Testament theology has been subject to recent philosophical analysis too (Gericke 2020). Work on the New Testament in this regard is also alive and well (see Divjanović 2015; Manomi 2021; van der Heiden, van Kooten, and Cimino 2017). It seems to engage in comparative work suitable to “philosophical reflection with the Bible” but also bears a distinctive stamp, attending to the use and influence of philosophy upon the New Testament authors themselves rather than using philosophical resources to interpret biblical literature, which is what we find among Hebrew Bible/Old Testament studies (see, e.g., Briones and Dodson 2019).

Distinctive too is, perhaps, the most prevalent contemporary concern about philosophy and the Bible: the “philosophical assumptions” that biblical interpreters bring to the text. Accusations of a rationalist mindset or Enlightenment presuppositions within the historical critical enterprise are familiar, as are the charges of logical naiveté and pre-critical (mis)judgment made against many confessional interpreters. The relation of philosophy and biblical interpretation has similarly been framed in terms of west-versus-east or modernity in contrast to ancient Near Eastern antiquity (see Yoder 2020 above). However, philosophical undercurrents seem, to me, distinct from the deliberate use of philosophical resources when interpreting the Bible. Citations of Aristotle in Calvin’s commentary on the Psalms, for instance, strike one quite differently than the unnamed presence of Descartes within Spinoza’s (2007 [1670]) *Theological-Political Treatise*. Distinct also are the hermeneutical and ideological fixations of the last few decades, noted widely in biblical scholarship (Collins 2005: 1-25; Barr 2000: 27-28): deconstructionist readings, ideological criticism, and their many concerns, foremost.

One final distinction to mention are several related fields of study that I have not had space here to probe, namely, “Christian Philosophy” (see work through The Davenant Institute, e.g., Minich 2018), “Jewish Philosophical Theology” (Frank, Leaman, and Manekin 2000), “philosophical hermeneutics” (Pokorny and Roskovec 2002), and a large portion of Christian “philosophical theology” that may not employ scripture at all or do so *ad hoc*. The history of philosophical engagement with the Bible may also begin to attract more attention as these works continue to emerge and receive scrutiny (see del Prete,

Schino, and Totaro 2022; Sarisky 2015). Weiss (2018), for instance, has engaged the ethics of the Hebrew Bible through a series of longstanding questions, which she approaches principally through the history of Jewish and philosophical interpretations. But while broad-based historical surveys can be found sporadically (see Gericke and Sæbø above), perhaps a retelling of that history, with an eye intent upon some of the questions and debates raised here, will begin to take shape.

Conclusions

This article has presented the current state of a growing subdiscipline in biblical studies. It includes a selective history of interpretation and thumbnail evaluation of current approaches. The trajectory of modes and styles is intended not for exclusive division or favoritism but for defining a domain within which these works can be located or self-identify. The basic outline should be clear, but there are four final characteristics that the above discussion has revealed.

First is the deliberateness with which a methodology for philosophical engagement is being developed. Those within the comparative approach, “reflection with” or “using philosophy to interpret the Bible,” seem most intent on such prolegomena. Second are the expectations that come into play regarding the biblical text, especially its meaning. Works on both ends of the trajectory incline towards a singular meaning for each text (see Gericke 2012: 13), but how that meaning is determined differs for these two groups (i.e., contextuality). More continental modes of philosophical reflection on the biblical texts seem not only comfortable with but affirmative of a polyphony of textual meaning, and seem to vary with respect to contextual sensitivity. Texts do not, even cannot, mean only one thing, an assumption that compounds the very style imputed to this mode of reflection.

These varied expectations with which scholars approach the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament disclose what may be the diagnostic of such philosophical engagement: how does one reckon with generalities alongside the historical and textual manifestation of scripture? The comfort and normality with which philosophy deals in generalities resembles the naturalness (and, in their impression, necessity) with which biblical scholars account for historical context and literary conventions. When the biblical texts are made to fit the expectations of the former, including a relative inattention to the historical and literary contexts of the Hebrew Bible (or New Testament), then one moves towards the philosophical end of the spectrum. When the Hebrew Bible (or New Testament) is handled with the tools of the latter, then one moves towards the exegetical end. Interestingly, generalities are the very feature that defines “philosophy” for Hazony (e.g., 2012: 272-273), and the very thing that he and Johnson search for within the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and, for Johnson, the New Testament (see 2021: 40-41). If it is not the principle that determines where the works surveyed here land along the trajectory, then it is certainly a significant matter for the process.

Third, except for the broad methodological question of how to relate the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (as well as the New Testament, though that is outside the scope of this article) and philosophy, including the more particular framing of that question just given,

these works do not necessarily have much in common. Rather, individual, and minority collective, interests have developed, such as epistemology (Healy and Perry 2007; Johnson 2018, 2021; O'Dowd 2009; Yoder 2020), philosophy of religion (Gericke 2012), ethics (Keefer 2021; Vesely 2019), political philosophy (Berman 2008; Hazony 2016) and the history of philosophical interpretation (Weiss 2018). What I have attempted to articulate here is a way of framing these various works, lending some methodological clarity on what might otherwise appear homogenous or entirely segregated.

Fourth is the observation that very little of the above involves biblical commentary. Such engagement was surely common in medieval, Reformation, and Post-Reformation commentaries (see, e.g., Smalley 1952), and yet modern commentaries make little explicit use of philosophy. Take one fraction of a small personal library as an illustration. Anecdotal though it may be, among the four dozen Hebrew Bible/Old Testament commentaries on the shelf next to me, excluding Ecclesiastes, I can find only a handful of references to philosophers. One will find a bit of Augustine and Philo, some introductory references to Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer, and a reference to Aristotle when his biology bears relevance to the history of a passage's interpretation, but these references are scant. On the other hand, the book of Ecclesiastes has long been subject to philosophical comparison (see, e.g., Smalley 1986), and half of my commentaries on the book contain index entries for Aristotle, Epictetus, Epicurus, Euripides, Hesiod, Homer, Kierkegaard, or Menander. In particular, a nice example of using philosophy to interpret Ecclesiastes appears in Müller's 2003 article, "Kohelet im Lichte der frühgriechischen Philosophie."

This state of affairs can be explained in several ways. Perhaps there has been a declining interest in and familiarity with classical and modern philosophy; perhaps the interest remains but the aims of biblical commentary no longer necessitate an explicit presentation of philosophy; or perhaps the sort of philosophical, comparative work described here has been taken up in articles and monographs, which then replace references to source material. These are all, I think, partly true. However, in the end, I think we can both work and await in this area with a decent amount of optimism. Several figures are defining the contemporary field of philosophical engagement with the biblical texts, an approach with a rich history and resurgence not lacking in energy.

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