

Ancient Israelite Perspectives On The Meaning of Life

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There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.

-Douglas Adams

ABSTRACT

Old Testament theologians have discussed a myriad of topics related to ancient Israelite religion. Yet perhaps the one question that haunts everyone who grapples with the world in the text is usually never asked, i.e., what is the meaning of life? In this article I attempt to answer it historically by looking at ancient Israelite perspectives on the meaning of life. After some remarks about the place and meaning of the question in contemporary philosophy, an introductory discussion on the biblical assumptions related to the matter is offered to inspire further research. The focus of the inquiry is moreover not only on Yahwistic assumptions about the meaning of human life but covers all forms of existence acknowledged by the Old Testament authors. The presentation closes with the suggestion that this topic can become the new "centre" for post-realist axiologies of the Old Testament.

A INTRODUCTION

In the book/movie *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams,¹ a group of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings demand to learn the Ultimate answer to the ultimate question of "Life, the Universe, and Everything." For this they build a supercomputer they call *Deep Thought*. *Deep Thought* informs them that they should return for the answer after seven and a half million years of calculations. When the fateful day at long last dawns, a massive crowd awaits the moment of revelation with festivities and bated breath. With trepidation *Deep Thought* tells them that the answer has been found but warns them that they are not going to like it. Undeterred the beings tell the computer that it does not matter – they simply *must* know what it is. And so in cold and clinical fashion, *Deep Thought* informs them that the Ultimate Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and

¹ See Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan Books, 1979).

Everything is 42. After a moment of stunned silence the disillusioned and confused beings protest, demanding an explanation. *Deep Thought* remains unmoved by their disappointment and assures them that it had checked the answer quite thoroughly, and that it is definitely 42. The real problem, according to *Deep Thought*, was that they never knew what the ultimate question was.

B THE MEANING OF LIFE AS A PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION

In biblical scholarship the tendency is to search for final answers to old and often trivial questions rather than a concern with the ultimate question. In this article, however, the question of the meaning of life will be the main focus. In this regard, it should be clear that the meaning of life is not likely to be found in a dictionary. Neither are the meanings of life assumed in the Old Testament something to be found in a biblical theology. The question itself, however, is everywhere as it is both popular² and philosophical³ in nature. Many philosophers have found it central to their reflective task to venture responses to the question of what, if anything, makes life meaningful. For example, Aristotle reflected on what he believed to be human function, Aquinas pondered on the beatific vision, Kant tried to explicate the highest good and so on. What is more, over the last 50 years or so something approaching a distinct field on the meaning of life has been established in analytic philosophy and in the last 25 years an in-depth debate on the subject has finally appeared.⁴

When the topic of the meaning of life comes up in philosophical discussions, participants often pose one of two questions: "What are you talking about?" and "So, what is the meaning of life?" The literature can be divided in terms of which question it seeks to answer. The first question requires a systematic attempt to clarify what people mean when they ask what

² See Julian Baggini, *What's It All About?: Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (London: Granta Books, 2004). Raymond A. Belliotti, *What Is the Meaning of Human Life?* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001); Christopher Belshaw, *10 Good Questions about Life and Death* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005); John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003); Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2002); Garret Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life* (South Melbourne, Wadsworth, 2003); Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

³ See David Benatar, ed., *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2004); Peter Heinegg, ed., *Mortalism: Readings on the Meaning of Life* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003); Elmer Daniel Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, eds., *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000).

⁴ Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (ed. Edward N. Zalta; Fall 2008), n.p. [cited 21 March 2011]. Online: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/life-meaning/>>.

meaning life supposedly has. In other words, what is the meaning of the phrase "the meaning of life?" To which of the following does the word "meaning" refer: (the) origin, source, cause, reason, purpose, nature, significance, value, content or quality (of life)? What is assumed as the correct reference in this regard makes a world of difference in how one might recognise an answer to the question. Interestingly, in ordinary language the question regarding the meaning of life tends to be revolve around a number of popular albeit unproven assumptions:

- (i) That life is something that has meaning
- (ii) That life can have only one meaning
- (iii) That the meaning of life does not change
- (iv) That the meaning of life can be known
- (v) That the meaning of life has to be given from outside it
- (vi) That the meaning of life makes sense
- (vii) That the meaning of life is good news and a cause for happiness
- (viii) That the meaning of life has something to do with humans
- (ix) That one is obliged to learn what the meaning of life is

None of these assumptions can be taken for granted in the philosophical debates. In philosophical discussion, several categories are typically found to constitute the bulk of classifications.⁵ Answers include supernaturalist theories which have in common the assumption that the meaning in life is be constituted by a certain relationship with a spiritual realm. Because both western and eastern philosophical traditions are included, there is no agreement on how the spiritual realm is constituted and perspectives are sub-classified as being either god-centred or soul centred. A second category involves naturalist theories⁶ which hold that meaning can be obtained in a world known solely by empirical and rational probing. Here a distinction is made between subjectivist and objectivist accounts.⁷ There is furthermore also a logical space for a non-naturalist theory which holds that meaning is a function of abstract properties that are neither spiritual nor physical.⁸ Finally, an assorted variety of nihilistic

⁵ See Metz, "The Meaning of Life," n.p. Metz has written about the topic elsewhere, see Thaddeus Metz, "Could God's Purpose Be the Source of Life's Meaning?" *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 293-313; Thaddeus Metz, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (2001): 137-153; Thaddeus Metz "The Immortality Requirement for Life's Meaning," *Ratio* 16 (2003a): 161-177; Thaddeus Metz, "Utilitarianism and the Meaning of Life," *Utilitas* 15(2003b): 50-70.

⁶ When not religious, these views are usually atheist and humanist, see Kurt Baier, *Problems of Life and Death: A Humanist Perspective* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1997).

⁷ Arjan Markus, "Assessing Views of Life, A Subjective Affair?" *Religious Studies* 39 (2003): 125-143.

⁸ Robert Audi, "Intrinsic Value and Meaningful Life," *Philosophical Papers* 34 (2005): 331-355.

perspectives can be found and have in common that they all deny that life is the sort of thing that has any real meaning.

C ASSUMPTIONS, METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The question of the meaning of life is indeed probably on the mind of many biblical scholars at some point in their career. Yet while many of our research concerns tend to involve autobiographical projections, no-one has seemed all-too-interested in exploring ancient Israelite assumptions on the meaning of life from a philosophical perspective. Perhaps the reason for this state of affairs is that many scholars have failed to notice that we do not actually know from face value what the biblical authors assumed about the matter. In the context of Christian philosophy of religion, the meaning of life is typically held to be the glorification of God (as the Catechisms and Confessions teach). But when asked for specifics on what the non-philosophical texts of the Old Testament assumed about the ultimate question, one might be a loss as to how to answer.

Because the Old Testament is an ancient collection of pre-philosophical texts, the basic concern of this study may seem anachronistic as it is not explicitly treated by the Old Testament authors. The fact is that while the Old Testament is not philosophy its texts contain a myriad of taken-for-granted assumptions about what life's meaning was thought to be. So while in ancient Israel the question of life's meaning may not have been formulated in the modern existentialist sense, we can play it safe and state the assumptions of this study as being the following:

- (i) That ancient Israelites assumed life had meaning
- (ii) That there were many meanings given different authors/characters
- (iii) That the meanings of life were not necessarily what they are today

The philosophical methodology adopted in this study is based on an adaptation of a descriptive variety of ordinary language philosophy of religion as practiced by the philosopher of religion Don Cupitt. In a little book *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech*, Cupitt, who is actually more Continental than analytic in style, attempted to discern the presence of a folk-philosophy of religion within ordinary language. He held that one could pick out all the phrases people actually use that are religiously or philosophically important and interesting.⁹ For Cupitt, the philosophical contents of "religion" are built into the ordinary language that religious and non-philosophical people actually use. This contradicts the popular belief that ordinary language philosophy is unsuitable for doing philosophy of religion.¹⁰ Cupitt therefore suggests that the time has come to look at how ordinary people from different historical periods

⁹ Don Cupitt, *The Way to Happiness* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2005), 2.

¹⁰ Craig Vincent Mitchell, *Charts of Philosophy and Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 68.

have looked at life in general, and at their own lives in relation to it in particular.¹¹ In what follows I hope to make a contribution to this quest by showing how some texts in the Old Testament fit in to these micro-histories of the ordinary language philosophy of life.

The context in which this study is to be located is therefore not so much post-modernism as *supermodernism*. The term is lesser known in biblical hermeneutics and comes from anthropologist Marc Augé's book, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.¹² While most biblical scholars appear to be modernists working on pre-modern texts in a post-modern world, I would like to imagine this study as located within a "supermodern condition." The latter is characterised by an excess of time, space and ego, all of which supervene on our inquiry in ways that distinguish it from hyper/postmodern obsessions with social and literary philosophy:

If distinguished from hypermodernity, supermodernity is a step beyond the ontological emptiness of postmodernism and relies upon a view of plausible truths. Where modernism focused upon the creation of great truths (or what Lyotard called "master narratives" or "metanarratives"), postmodernity is intent upon their destruction (deconstruction). In contrast supermodernity does not concern itself with the creation or identification of truth value. Instead, information that is useful is selected from the superabundant sources of new media. Postmodernity and deconstruction have made the creation of truths an impossible construction. Supermodernity acts amid the chatter and excess of signification in order to escape the nihilistic tautology of postmodernity. The Internet search and the construction of interconnected blogs are excellent metaphors for the action of the supermodern subject. Related Authors are Michael Speaks, "After Theory," and Marc Augé *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.¹³

In super-modernism it is not that the world lacks meaning – rather, what confuses us is the fact that there are simply too many meanings available to choose from. It is the same when we concern ourselves with the meanings of the Old Testament itself. There is just too much of it given the axiological pluralism in the history of Israelite religion. Analogous to super-modernism, we find in the Old Testament not the absence of answers but many implicit possible meanings. In the remainder of this article I wish to ask what the authors of the Old Testament assumed as answer to the question when understood as: "Why are we here? What are we living for?"

¹¹ Don Cupitt, *Impossible Loves* (New York, Polebridge Press, 2007), 51.

¹² Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* (trans. John Howe; London/New York: Verso, 1995).

¹³ Wikipedia contributors, "Hypermodernity," n.p. [cited 16 Jan 2010]. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hypermodernity&oldid=329598080>.

D OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES

As suggested above, while the Old Testament does not offer an explicit or unified philosophy of life its texts contain implicit assumptions about the meaning of life in everyday affairs, whether those holding them were conscious of doing so or not.

1 The Pentateuch and Former Prophets

Apparently the author of Gen 1:26-27 assumes that humans are here as substitute rulers of the earth.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נָעָשָׂה אָדָם
בְּצִלְמָנוּ כְּמַוְתָּנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְּדָגֶת
הַיּוֹם וּבָעוֹף הַשָּׁמֶן וּבְבָהָמָה
וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרָמֶשׁ
עַל־הָאָרֶץ every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

As with ancient Egyptian theo-mythology, the human rulers are copies of the deity in representing his role in a particular created space. The meaning of human life according to the author of Gen 1:26 is therefore not as flattering as it may seem (or is often held to be). The idea is basically that humans are placed on earth to do the work of the deity so that the latter may repose. The implicit worldview is one of a cosmic society in which the divine world represents the upper-class populace who can afford to subcontract ruling the earth so that humans can act on its behalf. Human life means taking care of divine property.

Thus the theological debate about what the image of god in the humans actually meant and the idea that Gen 1:26 teaches intrinsic human value may therefore be completely wrongheaded. It may be that reading Gen 1:26 as a compliment human life is actually little more than an anachronistic projection of a liberal politics of human rights onto the ancient text. The humans are here to be stand-ins for a god who is so aristocratic as to shoulder the responsibility to rule the earth onto human representatives. Seen in this way the point of the discourse is to compliment and elevate the deity, not to honour his human creatures. In comparative philosophical terms, this account is supernaturalist and god-centred rather than soul-centred. It is also subjectivist in as much as it presupposes that the meaning of human life is whatever it may mean *for the deity*.

In the second creation account there is a similar sort of cosmic *Apartheid* at work. Here too a supernaturalist, god-centred and divinely entertained subjectivist perspective on the meaning of human existence seems

to be taken for granted. Thus the incidental remark in Gen 2:5 with its quite alien answer to our question.

וְכֹל שִׁיחַ הַשְׂדָה טָרַם יִהְיֶה בָּאָרֶץ
וְכֹל-עַשְׂבַּד הַשְׂדָה טָרַם יִצְמַח בַּיּוֹם
לֹא הִמְטִיר יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ
וְאַדְם אֵין לְעָבֵד אֶת-הָאָדָם

No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and
no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for
YHWH God had not caused it to rain upon the
earth, and there was not yet a human to till the
ground.

This verse assumes that humans are here to till the earth (yes, the meaning of life is “gardening”). The reason why the deity needs humans to protect and till his garden is the same theo-political one as found in Gen 1 – it is beneath the god(s) to bother with such work. The sociomorphism is readily apparent as the story unfolds: YHWH checks up on his labourers only when it is cool and more convenient to visit. So Gen 2, like Gen 1, assumes that, contrary to modern Christian ideas, human beings exist as slaves of a Master. At least according to Gen 2:5, they have no use beyond that, as the entire cosmos is a hierarchy with the divine world as the highest natural kind.

In the rest of the Eden myth we find how the symbolism of the Tree of Life also witness to ancient Yahwistic assumptions about the meaning of life. The meaning of life in Eden is, besides gardening and security work, that it stops (Kafka). When the humans failed to eat from the tree of life they failed to gain the immortality they never had.¹⁴ From this it would seem that the deity was not assumed to value individual human life all that much. Humans were created as frail and mortal beings, lacking both wisdom and eternal life. Hence they were to reproduce and thereby recycled at an alarming rate. Some lives had no meaning (e.g. Gen 4; Abel = *hbl*, cf. Qoheleth). The genealogies of Gen 1-11 assume that most people will be remembered only for the fact that they formed a link in the chain to “be and begat.” The will to live in Schopenhauer’s sense of a blind striving for life for its own sake despite hardship is clearly operative here.

Interestingly, the first time the question of the meaning of human life is explicitly asked by someone is in the voice of the character of Rebecca (Isaac’s wife). In the narratives she not once but twice wonders what the point of life is in view of the suffering that accompanies it. In Gen 25:22 the context of her question concerns the pain which she experiences giving birth to unruly twins.

¹⁴ See James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

וַיִּתְרַצֵּחוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרֶבֶת וַתֹּאמֶר
 אָמַ-כִּי לְמֹה זֶה אָנֹכִי וְתַלְךָ
 לְדֹרְשׁ אֶת-יְהֹוָה

And the children struggled together within her;
 and she said: “If it be so, why do I live?” And she
 went to inquire of YHWH.

This text assumes there should be reasons for living and that the deity has an answer to the question. Yet with so much physical discomfort Rebecca seems to have felt that her life has lost whatever meaning it had. Then in Gen 27:46 Rebecca again wonders about the meaning of life, this time should Esau marry the women his mother do not approve of – that is, unwanted family relations seem to be assumed as a source for meaninglessness.

תֹּאמֶר רִבְקָה אֶל-יַצְחָק קָצַח
 בְּחַיִּים מִפְנֵי בָנֹות חַת אָמ-לְקָח
 יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר מִבָּנֹות-חַת כָּאֵלָה
 מִבָּנֹות הָאָרֶץ לְמֹה לִי חַיִּים

And Rebecca said to Isaac: “I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these, of the daughters of the land, what means life to me?”

These questions by Rebecca presuppose quasi-naturalist and subjective interpretation of the meaning of life. This text goes beyond the previous one in its subjectivism in that it assumes that life has meaning if it means something to *her*, irrespective of what it means to the deity. In the rest of the Pentateuch’s narratives and Law Codes the promise of a long and happy life and the threats of death all assume that the meaning of life is: a) to survive, and b) to live in harmony with the deity and each other.¹⁵ Here too the perspective is supernaturalist, god-centred, and subjectivist. Life is a task of serving and obeying in whatever ways finds favour in the eyes of YHWH. The general focus on human subsistence is complimented in the cult with the care and feeding of the deity which shows that a master-slave relationship is clearly in view. Many biblical translations would tone down the oppressive wording to refer rather to a “Lord” and his “servants” (recalling English colonialist status indicators). Humans, however, remain beings whose life’s meaning is attributive.

The rest of the Former Prophets presuppose that the meaning of life has a lot to do with the possession and cultivation of living space, namely, land issues. The deity has a land over which he rules and the people of Israel are those who belong to him and whose lives he directs. The later utopian ideals of the eschatological visions in the prophets link up to this. No eternal life is envisaged as making this life meaningful. Even the vision of the new heavens and new earth in Isa 65 represents humans growing old and dying, though they will make it to at least a hundred returning to dust (see Isa 65:20).

¹⁵ For the link between meaning and morality according to some philosophers, see Laurence Thomas, “Morality and a Meaningful Life,” *Philosophical Papers*, 34 (2005): 405-27.

2 The Writings

The later book of Daniel is an exception to the above, with the characters of the friends of the prophet also showing contempt at any sort of life that does not allow for the worship of their god (see Dan 3). In the stereotypical wisdom literature of Proverbs, however, the meaning of life seems to be the quest to gain wisdom so as to be able to live better and therewith longer (e.g., in Prov 3-4). In the more sceptical wisdom traditions of Job and Qoheleth, there is a return to pessimism and even nihilism as both of them struggle with the nightmare of injustice and futility.¹⁶

Job frequently asks the question of why one should live. It is assumed that the meaning of life is to be happy and that this can be taken away if one hits rock bottom. Hence the question in Job 3:20 (see also v. 23):

לְפָה יִתְן לְעַמֵּל אֹור וְחַיִם
לְמַמְרֵי נַפְשׁוֹ Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life
unto the bitter in soul?

The character of Job in this text assumes that suffering robs life of its meaning and that justice and happiness make life fulfilling. However, the discovery that the deity is beyond good and evil (Nietzsche) and that the meaning of life is not exhausted in human existence were the first steps to Enlightenment (see Job 38-41). Ultimately, as in Nietzsche, however, death *per se* was not so much a problem as was dying at the wrong time (i.e., before one has lived a full life or after a point of diminished returns). Interestingly, like Job many times central biblical characters wished to be dead because, despite enjoying the favour of the deity, they no longer felt life was worth living (e.g., Rebecca, Moses, Saul, Elijah, Jonah, etcetera).

Later on the assumptions of Qoheleth about the meaning of life border on nihilism. In this he prefigures Schopenhauer who thought of life as "a uselessly disturbing episode in the blissful repose of nothingness."¹⁷ Yet a close-reading reveals that Qoheleth's nihilism is Nietzschean "active nihilism" – the persona of Qoheleth finds the courage to say Yes to life as a gift and his axiology has hedonistic tendencies, as in 8:15.

¹⁶ And philosophers still do, see e.g., Brooke Alan Trisel, "Futility and the Meaning of Life Debate," *Sorites* (2001): 70-84.

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (Translated R. J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin, 1973), 21.

וְשִׁבְחָתִי אֲנִי אֶת-הַשְׁמָמָה אֲשֶׁר
 אֵין-טוֹב לְאָדָם תְּחִתַּת הַשְׁמָמָה כִּי
 אִם לְאַכְלָה וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְלִשְׁמֹוחַ וְהִוא
 יַלְוָנוּ בַּעֲמָלָלָיו יְמִי חַיּוֹ אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן-לּוּ
 הָאֱלֹהִים תְּחִתַּת הַשְׁמָמָה

So I commended joy, that a man has no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry, and that this should accompany him in his labour all the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.

However, both "hedonism" and "nihilism" are categories into which Qoheleth does not quite fit. What is important to note here is that while Qoheleth is at odds with other Old Testament texts on many theological subjects, with regard to his axiology (or the lack thereof) he stands in a long line of pessimists. While no biblical author is so nihilistic as to think of life as a "disease of matter," many of them would indeed admit that, as a popular slogan has it, "Life's a bitch and then you die." One example of just this sentiment is found in Ps 90:10:

יְמִי שְׁנָוִתֵּינוּ בָּהָם שְׁבָעִים שָׁנָה
 וְאִם בְּגָבוֹרָת שְׁמֹזְנִים שָׁנָה
 וְרֹהַבָּם עָמֵל וְזָהָן
 כִּי-גַּן חִישׁ וְנַעֲפָה

The days of our years are seventy years and if strong eighty years; and they are full of toil and injustice; for it is over soon and flies away

For the most part of the Psalms, however, the desire to preserve life for its own sake is paramount. The implication is that everyone wants to live, for example Ps 34:13:

מִי-הָאִישׁ הַחַפֵּץ חַיִם
 אֲהִבָּם יְמִים לְרֹאֹת טוֹב

Who is the man that desires life, and love days that he may see the good?

Of course, as always there are some very interesting exceptions to the rule, namely, to the obsession with life above everything else. While some texts seem to assume the significance of the deity revolves around his ability to give and sustain life, others like Ps 63:4 values YHWH as portion more than life.

כִּי-טוֹב חֲסִידָךְ מְחִימִים For your loving-kindness is better than life

Other sections of the Writings which show little theological concern with the deity, such as Esther, Ruth, Lamentation and Songs of Songs, are in some sense all nevertheless united in their attestation of a struggle for a meaningful life. Ruth and Esther focus on the preservation and continuation of life, both individual and communal. Song of Songs is concerned with love that

is stronger than death (Song 8:6) and that goes along with and ultimately leads to a full life (and therewith sex). Indeed, for many Old Testament texts the meaning of life is to have a passion for what one values (and therewith war).

3 The meaning of non-human life

But there is more. Discussions on Old Testament axiological assumptions will have to go beyond a concern with *human* existence. The texts do not assume that the meaning of life is anthropocentric. Given the Old Testament's god-centred subjectivist way of looking at things, one may well also attend to non-human existence and here begin by asking what the texts presupposed about the purpose of YHWH's own life. According to the text he is the living god, after all, and the question of what the texts assume made YHWH's own existence meaningful to himself and to humans has not been given its due in biblical theologies.

Even in philosophy proper the notion of the assumed meaning of divine existence is seldom part of philosophy of religion.¹⁸ The fact of the matter is, granted that in the world of the text, the character of YHWH was assumed to have reasons for doing what he did, it follows that what YHWH's character does in fact do and then feels about what he has done both imply that there are states of affairs that were assumed to make YHWH's existence more meaningful than others. That explains why the character of YHWH was made to act in certain ways rather than in others – because the narrators assumed this is what made a god's existence meaningful. Here axiology overlaps with the philosophy of action (and divine motivation theory) and interesting questions arise, e.g. *why*, according to different texts, did YHWH want to create a heavens and an earth, kill and make a live, reveal and conceal himself, rule over and relate to people, be worshipped and served, fight and save, etcetera?

A related question pertaining to the assumed purpose of divine existence (from the deity's character's own perspective) concerns the extent to which YHWH was assumed to have free will in his decisions. Based on textual representations it would seem that as a typical though often idiosyncratic Iron Age deity YHWH was assumed to be engaging in "innate" divine behaviour, acting out a stereotype attributed throughout the ancient Near East to any entity participating in "the divine condition" (cf. "the human condition"). For all his uniqueness among the gods of yore, in terms of certain basic properties, functions and relations, YHWH seems to have been acting on "instinct" (for a

¹⁸ Consider the absence of the question in those dealing with god-centred views, e.g., Paul Copan, "Morality and Meaning without God: Another Failed Attempt," *Philosophia Christi Series 2/6* (2003), 295-304.

god). Like other gods he cannot but create, reveal, bless/curse, save and destroy.¹⁹ He cannot but want to be worshipped and feared.

Does this mean that these things were assumed to make the divine existence meaningful? Does it mean that YHWH was assumed to be a slave to his own divine nature? In philosophy of religion, the discussion of divine freedom is a live topic. Yet this aspect of the supposed meaning of the divine life is less familiar to biblical theologians. It is a valid concern since while some texts presuppose absolute divine freedom and sovereignty others assume that the character of YHWH in the plot also acts pretty much according to how he already knows he will have to act given the way the future of human actions will play out (see e.g. Gen 15:12-16).²⁰

Not all texts assume determinism and some assume dual causality with both human and divine agents playing a role in actualising possible states of affairs. In many Old Testament narratives (e.g. the Joseph narrative of Gen 37-50), the divine existence was assumed to obtain meaning in the controlling human affairs to further ultimate divine interests. Here the meaning of divine and human existence intersects since the meaning of some people's lives in the Old Testament appear as coterminous to what the lives in question meant to YHWH who pulling the strings behind the scenes (see e.g., Isa 11, 45). In the end there is no one answer as the Old Testament narratives and poetry contain a complex array of diverse assumptions as to what made the character of YHWH's existence meaningful.

Aside from divine life, one might as well extend the scope of traditional philosophical curiosity to include textual presuppositions about the meaning of life also for other *non-human* agents (angels, demons, spirits of the dead, animals, plants, the sea, etc.). Take for example the life of the dead – what was assumed to be the point of this dreary post-mortem existence? Nowhere is YHWH said to have created the underworld, that is, Sheol. Early texts depict it as being out of his jurisdiction while later ones have him in complete control of it. Given Sheol's intrusion into this life the relation between YHWH and Sheol thus requires a philosophical elucidation itself.²¹

¹⁹ Patrick D. Miller, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000), 10.

²⁰ William Rowe, "Divine Freedom," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Edward N. Zalta) n.p. [cited: 13 Feb. 2010]. Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/divine-freedom/>.

²¹ The Old Testament "saints" had to find meaning in a life that was not fair and had no heaven or hell as incentive. On the issue in philosophy, see J. Jeremy Wisnewski, "Is the Immortal Life Worth Living?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005): 27-36.

E CONCLUSION

There are many more texts that beg for attention and even those attended to can be probed much deeper. Yet limitations of space require that what was said is only the briefest of introductions to a major albeit unexplored frontier. The meanings of life in the world in the text of the Old Testament are like the meaning of life outside it: complex, diverse, sometimes crude and always interesting. Most of the axiological assumptions are supernaturalist, god-centered and subjectivist.

In this inquiry the first concern was not whether the data happens to be theologically relevant or not. The challenge was to be creative in framing the ultimate question in relation to the biblical texts. This concern can become paramount in post-realist Old Testament axiologies of the future. It can even be considered as a potential candidate for a new "centre" in Old Testament theologies since every book in the Old Testament ultimately has this concern at its foundations (even if not in its modern form). Then again, asking what the text itself assumed on this most existential of questions might be precisely what will continue to be avoided, lest the answers are as useful as something analogous to 42.

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