

When Historical Minimalism Becomes Philosophical Maximalism

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author takes a closer look at the turn to philosophy in the writings of some scholars associated with so-called historical minimalism (Thomas L. Thompson & Philip R. Davies). Whereas scholarly focus has tended to be on deconstructive aspects of the collapse of history this contribution looks at one constructive part thereof, namely the overlooked reappearance of what boils down to philosophical maximalism.

A INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, most discussions of the relationship between the HB and philosophy were concerned with the distortive, absent or possibly constructive role of philosophy in the history of biblical interpretation.¹ The question of whether and in what sense the HB could itself be said to be philosophical in nature has become almost non-existent. In mainstream academia the HB is not considered to be a philosophical text, even if it can now more easily be approached and analysed from philosophical perspectives, or utilised as a resource for philosophical reflection.²

Since the dawning of critical-historical consciousness in the 19th century, viewing the HB as philosophical discourse has been considered anachronistic in light of historical-critical research into the HB's own literary genres within their ANE contexts.³ That was followed by the oft-repeated emphasis during the 20th century of what was held to be the irreconcilable differences between the "Bible and Philosophy," between "Athens and Jerusalem," or between "Hebrew and Greek thought."⁴ Succinctly, these differences can be summarised as follows:

First, the Bible contains, at its very core, a great deal of material that is not necessarily philosophical: law, poetry, and narrative. Second, we expect philosophical truth to be formulated in declarative sen-

¹ See James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 146.

² See Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

³ Cf. the early outline by George Farr, "Is there Philosophy in the Old Testament," *BQ* 16/2 (1955): 52-57.

⁴ Cf. classically Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (trans. J. L. Moreau; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), *passim*.

tences. The Bible yields few propositional nuggets of this kind. Third, philosophical works try to reach conclusions by means of logical argumentation. The Bible contains little sustained argument of a deductive, inductive, or practical nature, and attempts to impose the structure of rational argument on the biblical text yield meagre profit. Fourth, philosophers try to avoid contradicting themselves. When contradictions appear, they are either a source of embarrassment or a spur to developing a higher order dialectic to accommodate the tension between the theses. The Bible, by contrast, often juxtaposes contradictory ideas, without explanation or apology. Fifth, much of what the Bible has to say about subjects of manifest philosophical importance seems primitive to later philosophical sensibilities.⁵

Whether or not one agrees with the outline above, many HB scholars would agree that these qualitative differences represent individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions to warrant classifying the HB as a non-philosophical corpus. It is taken for granted even among those biblical scholars otherwise fond of philosophy and quite favourable to involving that discipline in biblical studies or using the Bible in the context of philosophical discussion.⁶

From the perspective of the history of biblical interpretation, however, the denial that the HB is philosophical in nature is actually relatively novel and outlandish. Throughout the pre-modern era philosophical content was ascribed to the HB, though not without controversy.⁷ Even during modern times the HB's wisdom literature was still considered to be "practical" philosophy⁸ and biblical theologians otherwise hostile to all things Greek and philosophical still referred to certain biblical authors' "philosophy of history."⁹ On the whole, however, the 20th century was characterised by a persistent insistence by biblical scholars that the HB was very remote from philosophical modes of thinking.¹⁰

Roughly around the turn of the millennium (2000), the situation again started to change and over the last decade or so, we can see what may be called a "return of the repressed." That is, renewed efforts are now being made to

⁵ Shalom Carmy and David Shatz, "The Bible as a Source for Philosophical Reflection," in *History of Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman; New York: Routledge, 1997), 13–37.

⁶ See Jaco Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion* (SBLRBS 70; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

⁷ See Gericke, *Hebrew Bible*, 41–80.

⁸ As opposed to "theoretical" philosophy. This represents an age-old Aristotelian distinction between moral wisdom and metaphysical speculation.

⁹ The examples are myriad but include occasional references to the "metaphysics," "epistemology," "ethics," "logic," "philosophy of history," "political philosophy" and "philosophy of life" of the individual biblical authors.

¹⁰ Barr, *The Concept*, 146–170.

restore relations between the HB and philosophy.¹¹ The phenomenon has spread to and fro across disciplinary lines to the extent of approximating a “philosophical turn” in HB scholarship.¹² This represents nothing less than something approximating a “paradigm shift”¹³ which is manifesting itself in at least six different ways:

- (i) An increase in philosophical reflection on interpretative methodologies;
- (ii) An increase in looking to the HB as a resource for philosophical reflection;
- (iii) An increase in philosophical approaches to and interpretations of HB texts;
- (iv) An increase in involving philosophy on the level of meta-commentary;
- (v) An increase in awareness of philosophical assumptions of readers;
- (vi) An increase in the constructing of the HB as philosophical discourse.

These six trends sometimes overlap and the distinctions cannot be said to be watertight. The last one in particular (6) can be considered the most radical of the lot as it represents the most conspicuous transgression of one of the ground rules of 20th century biblical hermeneutics, namely, do not distort the HB through philosophical concepts, categories and concerns.¹⁴ The remainder of this study, however, will seek to argue that the trend referred to in (6),

¹¹ For example, see Seizo Sekine, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Old Testament* (trans. J. R. Short; BZAW 458; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014).

¹² This (re)turn to philosophy has itself a counterpart in the earlier turn to the Bible and Theology in Philosophy itself. Various philosophical sub-fields have also taken a liking to the HB in particular as a philosophical resource. In recent Jewish philosophy, see e.g., Eliezer Schweid, *The Philosophy of the Bible as Foundation for Jewish Culture: Philosophy of Biblical Narrative* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008); Hazony, *The Philosophy*; Mark Glouberman, “The Holy One: What the Bible’s Philosophy Is and What It Isn’t,” *JPQ* 62 (2013): 43–66; In Christian philosophy of religion, see e.g., Eleanore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford, 2010). And also in philosophy of literature, see the overview by the biblical scholars Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008). The latter authors mention the work on the HB in philosophical theorists like Derrida, Levinas, Deleuze, Zizek, *et al.* Of course, the NT in general and the Pauline writings in particular have attracted much more attention than anything in the HB.

¹³ I say analogous because the concept of a “paradigm shift” is often used in biblical scholarship without awareness of the fact that Thomas Kuhn who coined the terms meant by it something applicable to the Natural or Physical sciences, not the Humanities and Social Sciences.

¹⁴ Barr, *The Concept*, 146–147.

though seemingly rare in the context of HB scholarship, has in fact occurred to a rather significant extent within a context where it has been almost completely ignored, that is in so-called biblical "minimalism."¹⁵

What has almost gone wholly unnoticed as a result of the methodological and ideological controversies surrounding the minimalists are the ways in which what can be said to be historical minimalism has in the work of at least two famous scholars gone hand in hand with "philosophical maximalism."¹⁶ And though reading the HB as philosophical discourse is historically nothing novel, unlike the case in many other contemporary interpretative contexts in which this occurs (e.g. certain circles of Jewish philosophy and Christian philosophy of religion), these philosophical maximalists are actually HB scholars not driven by a naive-realist hermeneutic or by nostalgia for pre-critical philosophical-theological commentary. What we are now seeing is a philosophical reconstruction of the HB by post-modern and post-critical readers, where the "post-modern" is seen as the intensification and continuation of the modern as opposed to an overcoming of or leaving behind thereof. In this new hermeneutical context the trend described in (6) above and also found in other academic disciplines has come to mean something altogether different.¹⁷

B TWO CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

To present evidence of "philosophical maximalism" within historical minimalism, some of the representative writings of two well-known scholars associated with "minimalism," Thomas L. Thompson and Philip R. Davies, will be discussed briefly.¹⁸ The objective of the analysis is neither to promote nor dismiss the ideas under scrutiny but simply to create an awareness of what the aca-

¹⁵ This term is controversial and disputed. I use it simply because it has become part of the vocabulary of the field with the specific reference (which I understand in a non-pejorative sense) to the turn away from reading the HB as history. Though the phenomenon is more complex than this one term suggests, it is used here for the sake of illustration and convenience.

¹⁶ This is my own neologism coined with the aim of indicating a reading of the HB in its totality as primarily a philosophical text.

¹⁷ It needs to be emphasised that nowhere is it claimed that historical "minimalism" of necessity gives rise to philosophical "maximalism." The fact that not all historical minimalists are philosophical maximalists proves this to be true.

¹⁸ As far as I know, the other scholars typically associated with "minimalism" (N-P. Lemche, K. W. Whitelam and I. Finkelstein) limit the scope of philosophy in the HB to the wisdom literature, especially Ecclesiastes (as is traditional). Here "philosophy" is considered one of the macro-genres along with legend, law, prophecy, poetry and history. On the level of methodology N.P. Lemche seems to be the most vocal philosophically but on the level of the biblical contents it is definitely Thompson and Davies who stand out as close to a pan-philosophical view as one can get, despite the fact that their interpretative approaches are not themselves philosophical but historical, literary and sociological.

demic and lay communities' emphases on the *deconstructive* aspects of historical "minimalism" has almost completely ignored, namely the *constructive* contribution of the "philosophical maximalism" in the work of the above-mentioned scholars.

C THE HEBREW BIBLE AS ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY (THOMAS L. THOMPSON)

Our discussion of Thompson begins with and is limited to his *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past*¹⁹ which contains all his claims that the HB is *philosophical* literature. This is emphasised several times throughout a book in which the words "philosophy," "philosopher" and "philosophical" occurs just over a hundred times. None of the reviews of the book mention anything more about its philosophical "maximalism" than brief remarks concerning Thompson's basic claims about ancient philosophy and about the HB as containing philosophical genres.

Nowhere does Thompson present actual arguments that the HB is philosophy. All he does is to assert repeatedly that the HB in itself represents philosophical discourse. For example, in his theological rhetoric he calls YHWH the "philosopher king of the gods."²⁰ With reference to the flood and Job stories, the deity is called the "quintessential philosopher" reflecting on creation.²¹ Even the motif of "the fear of God" is dubbed the "philosophical understanding" that is the beginning of wisdom.²²

And so it goes with almost all of the biblical characters in Thompson's monograph. Eve is the "philosopher" seeking wisdom.²³ "Philosophical language" dominates Moses' farewell speech.²⁴ The tale of Saul's fall from grace has a "philosophical theme."²⁵ David is a moral "philosopher" on the path of righteousness in Pss 1 and 2.²⁶ Abigail plays the "philosophical role" of the biblical author's alter ego.²⁷ Ecclesiastes is an agnostic "philosopher king" who as Solomon has spent a lifetime "studying philosophy."²⁸ Job is a "philosophical figure" who struggles with God over righteousness.²⁹ Even the poet in intro-

¹⁹ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999). This is the European title; the US version differs.

²⁰ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 28.

²¹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 299.

²² Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 50.

²³ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 287.

²⁴ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 283.

²⁵ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 68–69.

²⁶ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 54.

²⁷ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 47.

²⁸ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 16.

²⁹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 152.

spective texts like Ps 24 is said to have a "philosopher's goal."³⁰ In fact, the poetry that we find in the "philosophical traditions" of Psalms and Job actually establish "philosophical principles."³¹

Thompson sometimes equates philosophy etymologically with "a love of wisdom" and, more specifically, with the kind of self-knowledge we find as concern in Plato. And since there is most surely evidence of a love of wisdom in parts of the HB there must be "philosophy."³² Or so the reasoning seems to go. Thus Thompson simply insists that the HB's wisdom literature and "philosophical writings" (here distinguished) gives us our most immediate access to the intellectual world of ancient Israel.³³

According to Thompson, ancient philosophy is systematic or abstract but "based on *ad hoc* references to personal or other experience." Stories were collected as a paradigm for philosophical discussion.³⁴ The stories from Genesis 1 to 2 Kings are said to serve as a historical context for the rest of its literature, including the biblical poetry and "philosophical writings" (what exactly is meant by the latter here is unclear).³⁵ History in the HB is never historical; it is "reiterated history," a "discourse on tradition's meaning" and therefore "philosophical."³⁶ After all, biblical stories were known by biblical philosophers not to be literally true.³⁷

A "philosophical quality" akin to the Greek traditions centered on Homer and Plato is thus to be found in the HB³⁸ where "the theme of origins has the central function of tradition collection and "philosophical discussion."³⁹ The biblical texts are considered to be rooted in theological and "philosophical reflection" on tradition which is understood increasingly metaphorically.⁴⁰ The HB's discourse is therefore "more philosophical than religious" since it was an understanding of religion that had ceased to be credible.⁴¹

I would describe this as a learned world of discourse and commentary centered in a philosophical discussion about tradition.⁴²

³⁰ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 360.

³¹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 240.

³² Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 299.

³³ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 232.

³⁴ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 67.

³⁵ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 4.

³⁶ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 23.

³⁷ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 384.

³⁸ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 197.

³⁹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 216.

⁴⁰ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 239.

⁴¹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 32.

⁴² Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 42.

Thompson asserts that the HB is clearly not religious texts but "philosophical critiques" of religious traditions and practices.⁴³ The circular and ad hoc references in the biblical narratives are therefore to be seen as "philosophy based on the principle that there is nothing new under the sun."⁴⁴ Perhaps for this reason Thompson follows the post-colonialist and post-modern meta-philosophical view (actually dating back to Aristotle) that philosophy predates the Greeks (and therefore also Job and Solomon.) and has its origins in the ANE. More precisely, Thompson traces the origins of philosophy back to the schoolroom texts from Bronze Age Sumer and Egypt. There is a convention of over 2000 years of "philosophical proverbs" in the ANE before the HB was written.⁴⁵ The HB, just like Aristotle, creates a "philosophical past" to ground the fundamental principles being taught.⁴⁶

Thompson believes that a destiny lies outside the world of the text in the "philosophical dimension" of the story's meaning.⁴⁷ The astute reader will focus on "philosophical motifs" along with didactical ones.⁴⁸ The texts bear witness to the commitment to a moral and "philosophical life." Yet one is blinded by stories to the discussion of the larger philosophical context.⁴⁹ This is the well-known "theology of the way" of Jewish "philosophical pietism" in the texts.⁵⁰ It reflects not only large political and religious differences but also "philosophical divisions" within Palestine.

In the HB Thompson finds a "philosophical perception" of gods not present in commonplace understandings.⁵¹ There is an underlying "philosophical argument" in the implied discourse.⁵² The distinction between human and divine in the HB is standard "philosophical theology."⁵³ Some biblical authors had "philosophical principles" that were illustrated better through wisdom than story.⁵⁴ Thus Thompson sometimes distinguishes between "philosophical reflection" and sermons,⁵⁵ or between prose literature, with song and poetry and "philosophical discourse."⁵⁶ He also mentions priests, prophets and

⁴³ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 387.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 17.

⁴⁵ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 287.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 288.

⁴⁷ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 48.

⁴⁸ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 60.

⁴⁹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 249.

⁵⁰ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 292.

⁵¹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 298.

⁵² Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 326.

⁵³ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 327.

⁵⁴ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 335.

⁵⁵ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 389.

⁵⁶ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 394.

philosophers in that order,⁵⁷ so that by the latter one would think he probably means the sages of the wisdom literature. Yet even here there is inconsistency since many biblical narratives are also said to be told by "philosophers."

For example, it is said that the "philosophical tradition" of the wisdom literature has direct connections to the royal ideology of blessings and curses so that even the narratives and poetry of the Torah functions in the context of wisdom.⁵⁸ The return of allegory in Jonah is held to be fiction with the "philosophical theme" of God's ineffable mercy; and so is the rest of the bible fiction with "philosophical themes."⁵⁹ Thompson admits to differences between the HB and the "philosophical styles" of the Greeks, but only in terms of what is affirmed, the focus and the forms of expression.⁶⁰

Thus we see the "philosophical theme" of the poverty of human existence in Job.⁶¹ The fear of God is nothing other than the "philosophical virtue" of humility.⁶² "The way of mankind" is opposed to "the way of God" as "philosophical principle." Ultimately, the issues of interest to the biblical authors are for Thompson as much "philosophical" as they are theological, intellectual and literary.⁶³ Consequently, the HB is seen by Thompson as a patchwork of stories and song, all collected and composed for the purpose of "philosophical reflection." It was written by "philosophers" for "students of philosophy."

D READING THE HEBREW BIBLE AS PHILOSOPHY (PHILIP R. DAVIES)

Just over a decade later, yet written with many of the same assumptions as Thompson are some of the most recent (and probably most overlooked) writings of Philip Davies. Like Thompson Davies is associated with historical "minimalism" but is not commonly known for discussing the HB in relation to philosophy. However, also according to Davies, whose writings on the Bible and philosophy are more scattered than Thompson's, the HB is philosophical literature. Consequently, Davies's recent projects are not so much a repeat of his older a deconstructive historical agenda of a decade or two ago but a new attempt at offering some more constructive philosophical proposals for reading and appreciating the HB:

I am trying now to write a book that explains to the public what the Bible (in what follows, that means "Hebrew Bible" or "Old Testament") is and why it is interesting and relevant to them, not as a set

⁵⁷ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 394.

⁵⁸ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 132.

⁵⁹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 391.

⁶⁰ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 300.

⁶¹ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 125.

⁶² Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 252.

⁶³ Thompson, *How Writers Create a Past*, 292.

of instructions from a deity, nor as an antique curiosity, nor as a cultural icon. Curiously enough, few accounts of the Bible actually engage in its intellectual and existential agendas but sell it short (in my mind) as either theology or literature. But nearly all ancient texts are theological (the gods are part of the world that humans inhabit) and of course by definition all are "literature." What are the biblical theories about human nature, history, ethics, society, justice? You can hardly open a page of a Bible without being confronted with philosophical questions of almost every kind.⁶⁴

Notice that on this view the HB has "theories" about philosophical issues and "philosophical questions of almost every kind." What exactly is meant by this is shown in other writings by Davies. For example, in a relatively recent and almost completely ignored paper on "Introducing the Bible as Philosophy," Davies tried to put forward a secular alternative to "biblical theology," and argued that "when the Bible is approached as a philosophical response to ancient and modern human problems, whether individual or social, biblical texts can be explored, challenged and appropriated rather than simply received."⁶⁵

Davies thinks that the HB is philosophical discourse in the sense of putting forward philosophical ("intellectual") ideas about human nature, political theory, divine omnipotence, mercy and justice, history, ethics, *etcetera*.⁶⁶ Davies admits to there being something other than intellectual (his word for philosophical) ideas in the HB but still construes it on the whole as philosophy since this might be of most interest and make for more "enjoyment" of the Bible at a "dinner party."⁶⁷ Davies views much of the Hebrew canon as the product of intellectuals contemporary with ancient philosophers. Hence the HB can be constructed as a resource for subsequent intellectuals to follow whether they share its theological assumptions or not.⁶⁸ Just as an expert on Plato need

⁶⁴ Philip Davies, "Do We Need Biblical Scholars?," *The Bible and Interpretation* (2005), n.p. [cited 13 December 2012]. Online: http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Davies_Biblical_Scholars.shtml.

⁶⁵ See the abstract by Philip Davies for his essay: Philip Davies, "Introducing the Bible as Philosophy," (paper presented at the King James Project Conference, University of Sheffield, 26 May 2011), n.p. [cited: 10 January 2014]. Online: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/kjv/conference/programme/thurs>.

⁶⁶ Philip Davies, "Reading the Bible Intelligently," *Relegere* 1/1 (2011): 153–162. Other examples of Davies assigning a philosophical message to the HB exist but the relevant section of this essay is representative of his views given the scope of philosophical topics it covers and in contrast to other essays centred on single themes.

⁶⁷ Davies, "Reading," 152.

⁶⁸ Davies, "Reading," 152.

not be a Platonist in his metaphysics, so a biblical scholar can appreciate the HB's philosophy without endorsing any particular biblical ideology.⁶⁹

More specifically, Davies finds in the HB a set of patterns of discourse, meant to be followed in whatever ways the contemporary human condition might invite.⁷⁰ For Davies the Bible was not written to be a canon of authoritative texts but as a collection of writings that present a model, an exemplar and cultural agenda.⁷¹ Though the HB's text centers on a single god, the lack of agreement among the authors on the divine nature, actions and will shows the deity to be little more than a "philosophical principle" with which to communicate certain ideas.⁷²

Why all the god-talk then? According to Davies, all ancient philosophers appealed to gods and revelation in putting forward their ideas because that's how it was done (for anything to get done). For this reason we can explore the HB's insights, arguments and implications without necessarily having to buy into the entire system and its details. In fact, Davies believes that some cultural distance is absolutely necessary to appreciate and obtain a fair view of the HB as philosophical (intellectual) literature.⁷³

Curiously for a secular biblical scholar, Davies also suggests that there can be "philosophical foundations" in the HB for belief in a single god in relation to sociomorphic projection of the historical-cultural milieu. Allegedly, only the idea of a single divine monarch ruling over all allows for viewing the world as a meaningful whole and time as unified with a past and a future. Davies thus suggests that while monotheism may be presented as being given by revelation it can also be seen as the result of philosophical deduction, induction or reflection. YHWH is embedded as a "philosophical concept" as much as a cultural dogma.⁷⁴

Davies seeks to illustrate his general claims about the intellectual (his word of choice for denoting the "philosophical") ideas of the Bible⁷⁵ with reference to several seemingly philosophical issues on the agenda in the HB. These include philosophical ideas about "human nature" in Gen 1–11,⁷⁶ "political theory" in Leviticus to Deuteronomy concerned with an ideal constitution,⁷⁷ the philosophical-religious themes of omnipotence, mercy and justice in Gen 18,

⁶⁹ Davies, "Reading," 152.

⁷⁰ Davies, "Reading," 152.

⁷¹ Davies, "Reading," 152.

⁷² Davies, "Reading," 152.

⁷³ Davies, "Reading," 153.

⁷⁴ Davies, "Reading," 153.

⁷⁵ Davies, "Reading," 152–163.

⁷⁶ Davies, "Reading," 153.

⁷⁷ Davies, "Reading," 155.

Job and Jonah,⁷⁸ a "philosophy of history" in Joshua–Kings and in some of the prophets, including Daniel,⁷⁹ and "ethics" in the wisdom literature.⁸⁰

In his epilogue⁸¹ it becomes clear that by "philosophical resource" Davies means "intellectual nourishment." It is unclear why he equates this with philosophy proper (sometimes the latter is verbally equated with the Hebrew *chokmah* ["wisdom"]), or would want to. Nevertheless, he views the HB as philosophical and thinks that only those who are blind would believe it to amount only to myth, legend, prose and poetry, that is, religious texts. Davies claims that the HB is philosophy even though it does not look like the stereotypical versions of the modern subject for the good reason that philosophy has no essential genre of its own which to draw from. Therefore we can conflate philosophy and myth, story, song, *etcetera*. To deny this would for Davies be tantamount to privileging the format of analytic philosophy, which in turn would be provincial.⁸²

E ASSESSMENT

If we try to assess the merits and problems of the claim that the HB is philosophical discourse it might be prudent to take up the meta–philosophical question of what is meant by the concept of philosophy. Here three different contexts for the question may be distinguished. 1) What is meant by philosophy in the technical, prescriptive and stipulative definitions of contemporary meta–philosophy; 2) the ways in which the word is used in popular discourse; and 3) how the two biblical scholars whose views were discussed understood it.

Clearly the context of meta–philosophy proper which is a normative discipline is not applicable here. So let us start with the second option by looking at a standard dictionary or lexical definition of philosophy providing us with an extension of popular exemplars for the term:

1. Love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means and moral self–discipline.
2. Investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods.
3. A system of thought based on or involving such inquiry: *the philosophy of Hume*.
4. The critical analysis of fundamental assumptions or beliefs.

⁷⁸ Davies, "Reading," 159.

⁷⁹ Davies, "Reading," 161.

⁸⁰ Davies, "Reading," 162.

⁸¹ Davies, "Reading," 164.

⁸² Davies, "Reading," 164.

5. The disciplines presented in university curriculums of science and the liberal arts, except medicine, law, and theology.
6. The discipline comprising logic, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemology.
7. A set of ideas or beliefs relating to a particular field or activity; an underlying theory: *an original philosophy of advertising*.
8. A system of values by which one lives: *has an unusual philosophy of life*.⁸³

Since there is no such thing as a private language in biblical scholarship, it seems clear that when many biblical scholars affirm or deny that the HB is philosophical in nature they probably have one or more of these uses of the term philosophy in view. To my mind, both Thompson and Davies have used the word in the following manner. Both opted for (1) above with (2) sometimes making an appearance, (3) being obviously present, (4) seemingly impossible, unless perhaps presupposed, (5) anachronistic, (6) in ancient format, (7) basically present and (8) seemingly implicit.

With the above in mind, let us look at the possible arguments that can be inferred in favour of constructing the HB as a philosophical text.

- (i) The HB is ultimately a Hellenistic Bible that took its final shape in a context possibly influenced by philosophical thought, if not via Greece then through its ANE forerunners. This represents a tension, on the one hand a Hellenistic context is chosen to allow for philosophical influence; on the other hand the intellectuals of Hellas are presented as late-comers, which means they are not required for there to be "philosophy").
- (ii) Related to the point above, ancient philosophy was not created out of nothing by the Greeks but indeed represents a continuum of polythetic classes of related intellectual and religious phenomena across the ancient world.
- (iii) Historically speaking, since philosophy indeed has no essential *genre* of its own and varies in form and content among cultures and between periods (as comparative and world philosophy has shown), the fact that the HB does not look like stereotypical western philosophy does not disqualify it from being philosophy at all.
- (iv) There is also indeed an overlap between the wisdom literature of the biblical sages and some of the philosophy of the ancient philosophers so

⁸³ The Editors of the AHD, s.v. "Philosophy," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English language* (5th ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), n.p. [cited 21 April 2013]. Online: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/philosophy>.

that any success at showing the presence of wisdom motifs throughout the HB could warrant viewing the whole as somehow philosophical, namely wisdom-based via late post-exilic wisdom redaction.

- (v) If the HB is not first and foremost a historical document or edifying religious discourse then indeed one of the few things left for it to be is a form of ancient philosophical literature.
- (vi) Like many ancient and modern philosophies show, it is possible to use prose and poetry to convey philosophical truths about the world, human nature, ethics, social life, *etcetera*.
- (vii) If the HB does not strike us as philosophically profound or convincing it is both given our anachronistic expectations and because it is indeed alien and out-dated philosophical reflection that was not written down for us.
- (viii) The distinctions between technical and popular concepts of philosophy required to accuse the minimalists of sloppy usage of the term are only sustainable if one assumes philosophy has a classical conceptual definitional structure of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for falling under its possible-worlds extension.
- (ix) The refusal of many biblical scholars to link the HB to philosophy is not so much motivated by an actual knowledge of the nature of the philosophical as by uncritically buying into the anti-philosophical sentiment of much of 20th-century biblical criticism and biblical theology.
- (x) The hermeneutical excesses of the past in reading philosophy into the HB are not an argument that the corpus is not philosophical, only that its interpreters are projecting.

That being said, it is also possible to come up with several reasons for why the construction of the HB as philosophy is immensely problematic.

- (xi) It is difficult to see how certain sections of the HB are overtly philosophical, a point with regard to which both Thompson and Davies are themselves inconsistent regarding exactly to locate philosophical thinking (on occasion limiting it to biblical wisdom, otherwise finding philosophical concerns everywhere).
- (xii) There are good hermeneutical reasons based on sound historical and literary criticism for not viewing the HB as a philosophical textbook in the technical sense.
- (xiii) Both scholars seem not to distinguish between the concept of a proper philosophical text and that of a text containing incidental folk-philosophical assumptions.

- (xiv) There is also not a clear distinction between the text as itself philosophical reflection and the text as a potential resource for subsequent philosophical reflection.
- (xv) Just because philosophy has no genre essential to it does not mean that all genres are in themselves philosophical, even if the contents contain philosophical assumptions.
- (xvi) We seem to be dealing here with a typical problematic post-modern conflation of philosophy and literature which deconstructs itself in the actual practices of the exegetes seeing themselves as literary critics and not philosophers.
- (xvii) The claim that the HB can be ancient philosophy even if it does not look like modern Western philosophy may be true but it seems that the classification of something as philosophical should be limited to denote second-order discourse that is concerned not merely with asserting a worldview but on self-critical conceptual analysis and a questioning of the foundations of that worldview based on arguments (which the HB does only halfway, for example the existence of YHWH is never argued for or questioned, the nature of truth never discussed and the meaning of good and evil never analysed).
- (xviii) The equation of philosophy with biblical wisdom literature (partly based on a Platonic etymology and Aristotelian distinctions between practical and theoretical philosophy) appears not to be supported by expert scholars specialising in the wisdom literature and who have written on its relations to Greek philosophy.
- (xix) Also the equation of what is intellectual with what is philosophical is problematic since the former category does not of necessity include the latter, that is while all philosophers are intellectuals, not all intellectuals are (or were) philosophers.
- (xx) There appears to be a clear motive for why the two scholars would want to construe the HB as philosophical: it is what most goes against the grain of what they consider to be an out-dated historical paradigm (as is their wont).
- (xxi) If we accept that a lot of theory in biblical scholarship tends to involve autobiographical projection, it follows that both Thompson and Davies might have wanted to construe the HB as philosophical as opposed to religious not because they are versed in meta-philosophy but because the texts have lost all religious value for them personally.

Given the above assessment of what seems to be pro and con of the pan-philosophical approach to the HB in historical "minimalism," it would seem that

it is not so easy to either simply dismiss or concur with the ideas of these scholars *en bloc*. To be sure, one may go along with or against the reading of particular texts, yet whether the HB is ancient philosophy appears to be an essentially contestable issue.

F CONCLUSION

The reading of the HB as a philosophical text among some leading figures often associated with so-called historical minimalism represents examples of a return of the repressed (philosophy) in HB studies, especially given the severe anti-philosophical sentiment during parts of the previous century. Yet while reading the texts as philosophy is historically nothing new – and while these two scholars are most certainly not the best representatives of philosophical perspectives on the HB in recent years – their particular mixings of “historical minimalism” with “philosophical maximalism” come across as both something to be expected and also as unheard of (yet again).

Whatever one makes of it, the constructive turn to philosophy in the writings of Thompson and Davies has been neglected by mainstream HB studies more concerned with these scholars’ deconstructive turn away from history. Yet amid the popular albeit heated controversies surrounding the “collapse of history”, the parallel “rise of philosophy” was not coincidental, unrelated or something that should have been taken so lightly as though it were peripheral to more important hermeneutical developments. “Philosophical maximalism,” unconvincing and outrageous as it may justifiably appear to be to some, is but symptomatic of – even if only as part of the lunatic fringe – the larger philosophical turn currently underway on the margins of contemporary HB scholarship.

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