AOSIS

Metaphysical perspectives on YHWH as a fictional entity in the Hebrew Bible

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Within a literary ontology, YHWH in the Hebrew Bible is technically also a fictional entity or object. In Hebrew Bible scholarship, a variety of philosophical issues surrounding fiction have received sustained and in-depth attention. However, the mainstream research on these matters tends to focus on the philosophical foundations of or backgrounds to a particular literary theory, rather than on metaphysical puzzles as encountered in the philosophy of fiction proper. To fill this gap, the present article seeks to provide a meta-theoretical overview of the main contemporary philosophical perspectives on the metaphysics of fictional objects. Three views (and their sub-currents) are discussed, namely possibilism, (neo-)Meinongianism and (literary) creationism. Each view's theory is introduced and critically appropriated with reference to what is implied to be an answer to the question of what exactly the biblical character YHWH can meaningfully be said to be in the context of the metaphysics of fictional objects. In this way, the present study also goes beyond the traditional concern with the nature of God in Old Testament theology.

Introduction

When the Hebrew Bible (HB) is approached as a literary artefact, the character of YHWH therein can be seen as being, *inter alia*, a fictional entity. Though this may seem to be a controversial statement, it is not uncommon to encounter biblical scholars making claims along the same lines (already noted in Gericke 2004:30–31):

According to Gunn and Fewell (1993):

> To claim that God-as-character in the Bible is not the creature of the author/narrator is, in my view, perverse. (p. 61)

Carroll (1991) is of a similar opinion:

> The biblical God is a character in Hebrew narrative and therefore is, in a very real sense, a figure of fiction. (p. 38)

So is Clines (1995):

> Let us next recognise that the God in the Pentateuch is a character in a novel. God in the Pentateuch is not a 'person'; he is a character in a book. And there are no people in books, no real people, only fictions; for books are made, not procreated … (p. 190)

As Brueggemann (1997) puts it:

> Thus even with reference to God, the imaginative generative power of rhetoric offers to the hearer of this text a God who is not otherwise known or available or even – dare one say – not otherwise 'there'. (p. 33)

With a more normative insistence coming from Thompson (1999):

> It is not a good idea to believe in a god when he is a character in story! Don't think for a moment that the narrator … or his audience ever believed in … that kind of god. This is the world that the teller has created for his representation of Old Israel … (p. 304)

Of course, one can see such statements as stating the obvious. It should be noted, however, that they need not be taken to imply that the HB can be reduced to a work of fiction in terms of its variety of genres. Nor do they necessarily involve a claim that YHWH (or later, 'God') does not exist. Even so, these claims are made by scholars often associated with more radical approaches to biblical theology and are worded in such a manner so as to invite many questions with regard to what they might imply concerning the assumed metaphysical nature and ontological status of the entity YHWH described in this way.

The research problem, objectives and method

When it comes to research on YHWH as a fictional entity in the HB, up to now the available data all relate to the ontological implications of the philosophical presuppositions of literary criticism. YHWH's characters' fictional status is a given, rather than an object of philosophical interest. There appears to be a little interest in pondering the metaphysical problem of what YHWH as a fictional entity can be meaningfully said to be. To fill this gap, the discussion to follow will be concerned with providing a brief and critical introductory overview of three dominant metaphysical perspectives within the contemporary (analytic, rather than continental or otherwise) philosophy of fiction: possibilism, (neo-)menongianism and (literary) creationism. The objective will be to reconstruct and apply each perspective in such a manner so as to suggest the pros and cons of how it would approach the metaphysical question concerning the nature of YHWH as a fictional entity. The approach to the biblical data is synchronic and text-immanent merely for the sake of the introduction, without rejecting the diachronic and various historical dimensions (which are implicit in references to pluralism in religious language). The scope of the study can include only general theoretical background, which of necessity involves referring to YHWH in a diachronically generalising and non-nuanced manner (and being aware thereof). Given the limited space available in an article format, the actual exegesis of particular texts within their HB contexts will have to wait for the future application of the theoretical insights gained.

An analytic philosophical overview of metaphysical perspectives on the nature of YHWH as a fictional object

The discussion to follow is dependent on and indebted to the helpful outline provided by Kroon and Voltolini (2016:n.p.). The structure and presentation of the latter publication are substantially modified and reapplied to show what each of the three perspectives might imply for how HB scholars working with a descriptive-philosophical (as opposed to a literary critical) perspective might answer the metaphysical question of what YHWH as a fictional entity can be meaningfully said to be. Throughout the concern will be with YHWH as a literary construct so that the metaphysical perspectives from the philosophy of fiction are not meant as comments on the ontological status of God in Old Testament theology.

Possibilism

The first perspective available to us comes from the so-called *possibilist theory* of fictional characters. The name and arguments thereof are based on ideas found in the modal logic and the metaphysics of possible worlds (see Lewis 1986). The theory predicts that when it comes to the nature of YHWH as a fictional entity, the object referred to by the character's name, located in a domain of fiction (in terms of the ontological status of literary constructs), will not exist in the *actual* world. Instead, this form of YHWH can be found only in possible worlds in the text (i.e. 'possible worlds' in the metaphysics of modal fictionalism). In the world of the text (a Ricoeurian hermeneutical notion), stories about YHWH are fact; yet immediately the reader faces the problem of ontological indeterminacy. It arises as a direct result of the number of non-overlapping possible worlds in the text (supervening on theological pluralism in the biblical discourse).

The YHWH characters of the different possible worlds seem to be metaphysically distinct as they tend to be constructed with mutually exclusive properties. A possibilist metaphysical puzzle arises when one asks the question *which* of these versions of YHWH represents *the* fictional (as opposed to actual) entity referred to by that name (and alternatives; cf. Kaplan 1973:505–506; Kripke 1972/1980:156–158). On a literary level, there seems to be no principled way of deciding. For Kripkean neo-essentialism, such indeterminacy shows that *none* of these possible objects is the fictional entity YHWH (Kripke 1972/1980:157–158). Even if the indeterminacy could somehow be resolved, it remains metaphysically problematic to identify YHWH the fictional entity with a merely possible entity. In addition, YHWH as a fictional entity's ontological status would not even be threatened by an actual entity calling itself YHWH and appearing with all the properties that a particular story ascribes to the character of the same name. No matter how similar, an actual object that resembles a fictional object cannot mereologically overlap with it (cf. Kripke 1972/1980:157–158).

Be that as it may, Kripkean-type rigid-designation objections to possibilism about the nature of YHWH as a fictional entity do not affect all forms of the theory. For example, from Lewis's realist account of possible objects (cf. Lewis 1986), one may infer that an individual can be a YHWH-as-fictional-entity candidate if it has YHWH's properties in a possible world in the text in which the YHWH stories are told as a known fact (cf. Lewis 1978). In other words, each version of YHWH as a fictional entity would be only one part of the particular world in the text in which it appears. As each YHWH candidate as possible individual is 'world-bound', the various YHWH candidates cannot and need not be identical to each other.

That being said, there exists another possible way to employ Lewisian modal metaphysics in a possibilist model to conceive of each world in the text's YHWH candidate as being identical to one and the same fictional entity (cf. Lewis 1986). It involves the simple supposition that one encounters the character of YHWH as a reader of the YHWH stories whereby, despite differing substantially in terms of overall qualitative similarity, various YHWH candidates will all become counterparts by *acquaintance* in the mind of the reader (within a community of fellow-readers). In this way, every version of YHWH as a fictional entity is, in its respective world in the text, the character of the God called 'YHWH'

whom one or one's readerly community learn about by reading the YHWH stories (cf. Currie 1990:137–139; Kroon 1994; Lewis 1983).

As the inferences drawn by Sainsbury (2010:82–83) imply, Lewis' possibilism can accommodate a plurality of possible YHWH-candidates. It is able to do so by abstaining from identifying YHWH, the fictional entity, with any one particular individual of them. Instead, the HB scholar operating with this view can reconstruct the relation between talk of YHWH and talk of possible YHWH candidates along the lines of the model implied by the concept of precisification (i.e. a technical term referring to what is countable and what is not) in Lewis' work on mereological vagueness. Even so, Kripkean-type objections against possibilism have been more influential in the philosophy of fiction compared with Lewis' metaphysics of possible worlds used to argue in favour thereof.

Another possibilist alternative is to adopt a so-called fixed domain conception of quantification. Here, one has a fictional individual such as YHWH in the HB at one's disposal in the form of a non-existent entity in the actual world but as an existent entity in other possible worlds (Berto 2011; Priest 2005). As a result, the possibility exists that the indeterminacy of reference as a semantic problem of the modal logic may not arise. Firstly, there are the HB's conceptions of YHWH. It is all these versions of YHWH (re-/de-)constructed as a fictional entity which technically exist only within the many possible worlds in the text. On this view, the HB does not arbitrarily offer one YHWH candidate from among all possible YHWH candidates, each located in its own possible world. Rather, the real authors of the HB *intend a* particular individual that does not exist in the actual world but which instead realises the YHWH stories in some other possible worlds. Trivially, this individual is YHWH, the fictional entity.

The version of possibilism just described encounters other obstacles too. In its metaphysics of fiction, YHWH as a fictional entity does not *actually* possess the properties in terms of which his character is constructed in the relevant stories. Instead, YHWH only has these properties in (some of) the worlds of the text in which he exists. Thus, YHWH the fictional entity technically does not instantiate the property of being a god. It is only possibly such within the worlds in the text where this particular character-type or literary object is encountered.

(Neo-)Meinongianism

A second metaphysical perspective available to HB scholars involves seeing YHWH's fictional personas as *Meinongian objects*. On this view, following Meinong (1904), one starts with the idea that besides concrete entities that exist spatiotemporally and abstract entities that exist non-spatio-temporally, there are fictional entities such as YHWH, being literary constructs in the HB, that neither exist spatiotemporally nor exist non-spatio-temporally. As a paradigmatic Meinongian object bereft of any sort of being,

YHWH as a fictional entity can be said to have subsistence (*Bestehen*) rather than existence (*Existenz*). Moreover, YHWH as a fictional entity can still be thought of as instantiating properties. A Meinongian perspective would say that YHWH as a fictional entity being such-and-so (YHWH in the HB's *Sosein*) is independent of the same fictional entity's being as such (YHWH in the HB's *Sein*). The *Sosein*-specifying properties of YHWH in the HB are precisely those properties in terms of which the fictional textual object is descriptively given.

In the jargon of later Meinongian metaphysics of fictional objects, one may also speak of a *Characterization Principle*. In the words of Routley (1980:46) following what is presupposed in Meinong (1904:82), irrespective of whether or not a particular version of YHWH as depicted in the HB is thought to exist as an actual object, his fictional personas have properties in terms of which YHWH is given or characterised. That is, every textual construct that is characterised as being YHWH, is in fact YHWH. Take, for instance, the construction of YHWH as a God of the HB. YHWH as a fictional object cannot as such exist in the actual world, yet we can say that, even in the latter domain, YHWH still instantiates both the properties of being described as a God and as being in the HB. If this is accepted, the possibilists' problem of YHWH ending up being a property-less fictional entity vanishes, as he now indeed instantiates the properties ascribed to the character of the deity as constructed in the associated stories. This also implies that YHWH as a fictional entity is not completely determined with respect to his properties as is the case in possibilism (cf. Marek 2009; Raspa 2001).

Applied to HB studies, it can be said that modern versions of Meinongianism both retain and dispose of what Meinong's view implies for what we can say about the nature of YHWH as a fictional entity. On the one side, one finds so-called *orthodox* neo-Meinongians (see Jacquette 1996; Parsons 1980; Routley 1980). Their arguments imply that YHWH as a fictional entity can be regarded as a Meinongian object in the sense of being a concrete correlate of sets of properties. On the other side, there are the *unorthodox* neo-Meinongians for who YHWH as a fictional entity belongs to a subset of Meinongian objects (e.g. Zalta 1983). Here YHWH's character in the HB should be conceived of as an object that has a non-spatio-temporal mode of existence as abstract object. Comparatively then, whereas one side implies the fictional entity YHWH's characterisations to be a Meinongian object (correlates of sets of properties), the other side seems to suggest that YHWH's character metaphysically approximates something like a generic object (cf. Pelletier & Zalta 2000; Zalta 1983:41–47).

In other words, there is a metaphysical distinction between orthodox and unorthodox neo-Meinongian perspectives on what YHWH as a fictional entity can be said to be. It is a metaphysical problem for HB scholars because it presupposes a distinction between kinds of properties that YHWH in the HB instantiates and modes of predication involved in the construction of YHWH's character. Basically, all

neo-Meinongian views imply that the fictional entity YHWH can be said to instantiate all the properties given in the narratives about him. This subview thus adheres to the arguments of Meinong (1972 [1916]) which, following those of Mally (1912), imply that the properties of the character YHWH in the HB are nuclear properties (cf., e.g., Jacquette 1996; Parsons 1980; Routley 1980:507–510).

However, for HB scholars viewing YHWH as a Meinongian object, the fictional entity also instantiates *extra-nuclear properties* that lie outside the scope of the narratives in which his character subsists and of the properties YHWH as textual construct has in the actual world. This may be understood in different ways. For example, if one accepts what the arguments of Zalta (1983:12) imply regarding encoding being a primitive notion, the view could form part of a higher order modal theory that may be applied to discover the extra-nuclear properties of YHWH as a fictional object. In contrast, Castañeda (1989:200) and Rapaport (1978:162) offer arguments in which it is implied that YHWH as a fictional entity can be said to instantiate a property internally or constitutively if and only if that property is a member of the set of properties correlated with his character in the text.

Prima facie, for many HB scholars, the distinction between 'modes of predication' with regard to YHWH as a fictional entity may seem more functional for dealing with the textual data of the HB than the 'kinds of properties' distinction (cf. Jacquette 1989; Zalta 1992). One reason for this is that there seems to be no workable criterion for distinguishing nuclear from extra-nuclear properties in the character of YHWH: some properties seem to be both. Consider the property of *being a storied character*. *Being a storied character* may seem to be the prototypical candidate for being an extra-nuclear property for YHWH as a fictional entity. But how is this to be understood in the context of nascent meta-fictional cues within the narratives in the HB where YHWH is not constructed as a flesh and blood individual but instead becomes as a character in a story told by the human protagonists or antagonists? (i.e. as a character in a story within a story).

Whether the distinctions noted above seem problematic to the HB scholar or not, the neo-Meinongian theory has the benefit of being able to account for the idea that YHWH as a fictional entity *necessarily* instantiates the properties that his character has in the relevant stories. For example, it is difficult to conceive how YHWH could *not* have been constructed as a God. At the same time, it is implied in some biblical narratives that YHWH did not have to become the God of Israel, so that at least whose God the character was going to be is for the most part, with reference to the worlds within the text, assumed to be a purely contingent choice on YHWH's part. Irrespective of how one construes the problem, neo-Meinongianism covers both sides so as to provide a condition for the identity of YHWH as a fictional entity: If the character of YHWH in one text has all the same nuclear properties as the character of YHWH in another text, the two fictional entities are identical (cf. Parsons 1980:28, 188).

One problem with this view will quickly be noticed by biblical scholars familiar with the history of the biblical texts. It is not so simple that once one has listed a certain set of properties one *ipso facto* has the character YHWH as a fictional entity. The process of constructing YHWH as a fictional entity was much more complicated, with neo-Meinongianism unable to offer more than a Platonistic picture of an ideal form of YHWH predating the story-telling activities that intuitively bring his literary personas into being. But since YHWH as a fictional object is the *creation* of biblical authors (and other involved parties), neo-Meinongianism becomes problematic in as much as it is unable to accommodate them.

Literary-creationism

The significance of the creative role is taken seriously by the metaphysical views put forward by *artifactualist* or (literary-)*creationist* accounts (here not to be confused with the more familiar apologetic notion of creationism as an attempted pseudo-scientific protological argument against the theory of evolution; see Salmon 1998; Searle 1979; Thomasson 1999; Voltolini 2006). The same ideas can already be found in the embryo of earlier philosophies of fiction (see Ingarden 1931; Kripke 1973; van Inwagen 1979). According to our third perspective, YHWH as a fictional object in the HB is an artefact and his biblical characterisations came into being only after having been conceived by various traditions, authors, redactors, editors, scribes, and so on. As such, YHWH in the text is in a very real sense an authorial creation, and there with an abstract object (as in neo-Meinongianism). However, this view also suggests that the character of YHWH in the HB (unlike Platonic *abstracta*) has a beginning in time and is ontologically dependent (cf. Thomasson 1999).

From a literary-creationist perspective, though historical rigid dependence on authors' accounts for YHWH as a fictional object's coming into being, constant generic dependence is assumed to account for YHWH as a literary construct's continued existence (persistence). Applied to the context of the HB in this manner, such a metaphysical take on the persistence of YHWH as a fictional object might appear as common sense in terms of explaining the character's generation. Even so, the critique found in Yagisawa (2001) suggests that if we have taken this option we run into the paradox where the notion of YHWH's character being created contradicts the assumption that YHWH as a fictional character does not exist in any sense of the word (contra Goodman [2004]). In another critique, this time implicit in Brock (2010), speaking of YHWH's character's 'creation' is explanatorily non-informative.

In response, HB scholars who are literary-creationists in their metaphysics of YHWH as a fictional entity might insist that the appeal to a creation of his character is able to sidestep several obstacles challenging the other two metaphysical theories. For example, there are many YHWHs in the different narratives of the HB. Different characterisations may share many properties, but ultimately they do not presuppose a shared authorial genesis. Metaphysically speaking, in the HB

as a whole, it is problematic to speak of YHWH as being just one character (even in contexts where YHWH is believed to be one God). For what has come together in the so-called final form of the text are many utterly independent acts of authorial generation (cf. Voltolini 2006:32).

It is not clear how a HB scholar assuming a creationist point of view would handle the puzzle of YHWH's various characterisations as indiscriminable fictional objects. YHWH in some doubled narratives in Samuel-Kings and Chronicles are identical without the biblical authors involved engaging in double acts of creating the fictional entity YHWH at every turn (cf. Voltolini 2006:234–235).A second objection raised involves the nature of the creative process in the construction of the HB and the relation between it and the identity of YHWH as a fictional object. The generative process technically only produces an intentional object (rather than a fictional one) (see Thomasson 1999:89). But if YHWH as an object of consciousness is not yet a fictional entity, how does YHWH's character in the HB become what it is?

Some literary-creationist responses to this question would imply that YHWH becomes a fictional entity when the associated characterisations are encountered in the worlds of the text by more than one reader. Others might seek to identify a functional criterion to determine which versions of YHWH as intentional object are also fictional objects. Creationists such as Schiffer (1996; 2003) and Thomasson (2003a, b) put forward responses that seem to imply that YHWH as a fictional object within the HB comes into being only once the activities of scribal imagination are terminated in the construction process (featuring YHWH as a certain type of God who engages in certain kinds of actions). Yet the metaphysical puzzle remains: *What* is this metaphysical object that YHWH as a fictional entity generated in this way can be said to be? What are the identity conditions for YHWH as a created fictional object in the HB?

With regard to these problems, the literary-creationist viewpoint does not imply, as did the others, that a fictional entity, YHWH, in the HB instantiates all the properties that characterise the deity in the stories in which it appears. Rather, YHWH simply happens to have these particular idiosyncratic properties *according to the story*. It is not true that the character of YHWH in the world of the text is a God – only an actual entity in the world outside of the text can be such (on the texts' own admission!). Consequently, creationist perspectives suggest that YHWH as a fictional entity in the world in front of the text (the world of the reader) genuinely instantiates only those properties that neo-Meinongians would call extra-nuclear. Examples of such properties include *being a fictional god* or *being the authors' creation* (cf. Thomasson 1999). For the same reason, literary-creationism cannot explain how YHWH as a fictional entity *actually* instantiates the properties of his character in the worlds of the text.

Finally, the limited scope of YHWH as a fictional entity's extra-nuclear properties also leaves one with the metaphysical puzzle of how to individuate his character. This includes the question of how the puzzle relates to the complex literary character of YHWH that the scholars quoted in the beginning referred to. It is hard to say. For one, biblical scholars' literary-critical approaches tend to avoid metaphysics altogether. In this context, the usual suspect is a popular interpretation of Platonism that influenced Christian systematic theology and which has led to distortive practices in Old Testament theology. Moreover, since most literary-critical perspectives will not consider the individuation of YHWH as a metaphysical problem but rather a narratological one, they will either tend to consider the puzzle as illegitimate or not something biblical scholars need to bother with.

If we do attempt to provide a philosophical perspective on the matter, however, the arguments of Thomasson (1999:5, 63) seem to imply that there might be sufficient identity conditions for YHWH as a fictional entity *within* the HB as a literary work: characterisations refer to one and the same fictional object YHWH if they instantiate exactly the same properties. This is not necessarily very helpful if the character of YHWH in the HB technically appears as multiple fictional entities instantiating incommensurable properties in different worlds in the text. The only response left seems to involve concluding that one can only provide a necessary condition where characterisations x and y are the same fictional entity YHWH if and only if one author is competently acquainted with the character of YHWH of another and intends to import that character into his own narrative (cf. Thomasson 1999:67).

But things are not so simple, especially from a hermeneutical point of view. Pure import is neither possible nor verifiable, irrespective of what an author's intentions were, since it will simply be their interpretation (cf. Thomasson 1999:68). Authorial intention can also be overruled in the case of a *fusion* of YHWH's characters, where one HB author intends to import two characterisations of YHWH from elsewhere. Clearly, given the transitivity of identity, the fictional entity that is YHWH as thus constructed is not identical with either of its forerunners, and the author does not ensure the particular object's persistence, at least from a logical-metaphysical perspective.

Some final remarks for future research

This article represents the first attempt within HB studies to come to terms with philosophical perspectives on the metaphysical puzzles generated by the nature of YHWH as a fictional entity in the worlds of the text. The objective and scope were limited to providing a brief meta-theoretical introduction to the implications of major contemporary metaphysical perspectives in the philosophy of fiction. It was also suggested that every one of these views (and the diverse interpretations within each) holds the potential for both clarifying and obscuring some or other given of the biblical data related to the problematic. Consequently, metaphysical puzzles will inevitably attach themselves to any associated attempts at coherently stating what it means to speak of the nature of YHWH as a fictional entity in the HB against the backdrop of the philosophy of fiction. But whether one

assumes or applies a possibilist, (neo-)Meinongian, or (literary) creationist point of view on what YHWH as a fictional entity is supposed to be in metaphysical terms, it may be concluded that much specialised and applied philosophical research still awaits. It is with the latter in mind that the present study may be seen as providing HB scholars with a meta-metaphysical prolegomenon to all related future inquiries. Answers may forever elude us, or the textual data may very well resist any systematic or totalising biblical philosophy of fiction. Whatever the case may be, simply a clearer and more comprehensive context-specific understanding of the metaphysical puzzles HB scholars are dealing with in philosophical attempts to make sense of YHWH as a fictional entity is, in my view at least, quite sufficient.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

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