The Ontological Status of Yahweh and the Existence of the Thing we call God

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Abstract
The essence of deities has captured our imaginations for as long as we can remember. Does a God exist, or is the divine entity just a figment of our dreams, a projection? Is God what Aribiah Attoe calls a "regressively eternal and material entity" or what Gericke calls "a character of fiction with no counterpart outside the worlds of text and imagination"? This paper aims to wrestle with those questions from a theological perspective and to look at the ontological status of Yahweh and how that worldview lends itself to African Traditional Religions in conversation with Attoe's method of inquiry from the perspective of African Metaphysics. This paper aims to be a part of the larger project undertaken by the author, showing that philosophy can and should be an auxiliary discipline in Old Testament Studies as it has been seen, both fields have ways of similar arguing and coming to the same conclusions. This paper is intended to be an interlocutory exercise or experiment and does not seek to validate any hypothesis about either view.
Keywords: Yahweh, God, Existence, Philosophical Criticism, Old Testament, Metaphysics.

Introduction
Many important questions about the essence of God, post-Gnosticism, have been raised by theologians and philosophers alike. Those positions will supply us with some background to introduce the central theme in Jaco's work: the ontological status of Yahweh. To query the ontological state of Yahweh is also directly asking the question; does Yahweh exist? Dealing with notions of being, first causes, and the problem of existence is considerably complex, and there is no other grammar that captures the essence of these arguments than the philosophical one we have at our disposal. I will review the major themes of the proposition as explored by Jaco Gericke, as I feel no one can marry philosophy and the Old Testament as he does; his contributions are significant and, at times, challenging but worthy of assessment. Jaco dedicated his PhD. studies to the question of whether Yahweh exists. In those 500-plus pages, he urges us to determine our own beliefs rationally.

Jaco's system derives from the fundamental belief that the world of the Old Testament has more to offer than theology. He contends that Old Testament scholars seem to be interested in debating every conceivable topic about the Old Testament religion except whether or not Yahweh exists (GERICKE 2004, 32). One can cite several reasons for this notable absence in discourse (2004, 32). Firstly, scholars limit themselves to noting that nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do

we find arguments that deal with ontology. Secondly, the absence of such ideas seems to be backed by the lack of interest in philosophical questions because it is often thought that the construction of such arguments is the job of the discipline philosophy of religion. This essay will look at the case against realism and the ontological status of Yahweh, and the existence of the thing we call God.

Jaco Gericke and the ontological status of Yahweh
Part I – The case against realism.

Old testament studies seem to be the reason for its undoing due to the privileging of historical readings over philosophical ones due to nomenclature, grammar, the hierarchy of disciplines, and special issues. Philosophy is often treated with suspicion and branded as having no place in Biblical studies. This may be primarily due to the definition and conceptual history of the discipline and the historical contentions between these two ideation spaces. Philosophical inquiry is at the heart of religion and biblical exegesis. Gericke (2004, 33) notes that due to this suspicion, any venture into philosophy is branded and stigmatized as positivist, rationalist, modernist, etc. An interesting observation, given how theologians are now venturing into post-structuralism as an interpretative method.

Since very few interpretative approaches and methodological innovations exist in Old Testament concerning philosophy, Gericke (2004, 33) adopted the strategy of *philosophical-critical analysis,* which he defines as "an approach to the text that concerns itself with questions generated in the reading of the Old Testament that relate to the issues on the agenda of the discipline known as the philosophy of religion (and not philosophy per se or any other subdivision)." He explains that philosophy of religion is utilized in an auxiliary fashion analogous to how Old Testament scholars use other disciplines such as history and sociology of religion. The agenda of philosophy of religion concerns itself with several issues, namely but not limited to; (1) the nature of religion, (2) the nature of religious language, (3) the concept of revelation, (4) the nature of God (PAILIN 1986, 03).

In a three-part article series, Gericke (2005; 2006; 2007) sets on a quest in search of the philosophical Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. In the first part, he makes his case for intelligent critical analysis and philosophy of religion as an auxiliary discipline in Biblical studies. He expands on the methodology and identifies its tenets in the second part of the series to provide introductory thoughts on philosophical criticism as a form of biblical criticism. The series culminates in the curation of a higher-order discipline called 'philosophy of Old Testament religion' to which Gericke subsequently published two books; *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion* (2012) and *A Philosophical Theology Of The Old Testament: A Historical, Experimental, Comparative and Analytic Perspective* (2020).

The quest for a philosophical Yahweh now begins. I will first assess the first part of the series to outline Gericke's project. In his meditations, Gericke sought clarity and certainty. The particular matter of concern is the existence of God. He notes that since primarily the question has been heralded mainly by philosophers, i.e., Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Hume, Kant, Darwin, etc., these arguments are not necessarily all applicable to the Old Testament because the deities in question have different profiles and exist on other conceptual planes. Thus, scholars cannot apply those arguments uncritically.

The God of the philosophers and that of the Old Testament deserve special assessments given their different profiles. To jumpstart his thesis, Gericke reasons against realism to argue against the existence of Yahweh. Let us set the scene; how does one prove that Yahweh exists and is just a product of speechwriters? Phenomenologically, to prove that something exists, we will have to outline its attributes, essence, and materiality and create a general profile. Such a thing would need specific identifying markers that fit into the acceptable standards of being that thing. Since realism maintains that something can exist independently without relational subjects, Gericke (2004, 36) argues that at the preliminary stages of ontologically reconstructing Yahweh, realism begins to fall apart at the seams since Yahweh exists mainly relationally.

According to Gericke (2004, 36), it is not enough to say that Yahweh, as depicted in the Old Testament, exists, but that statement should be qualified by anti-realist skepticism that asks the question, which Yahweh?. He lists the various versions that exist with their different predicates. I will only list a few;

(1) Yahweh who is the only God (cf. 2 Kings 5:15; Isaiah 45:5).
(2) Yahweh who is NOT the only God (cf. Genesis 3:22; Judges 11:24; Psalms 82:1; 97:7).
(3) Yahweh has a localized presence (cf. Genesis 4:16; 11:5; 18:21).
(4) Yahweh who is omnipresent (cf. Psalms 139:7-10; Jeremiah 23:23-24; etc.).

Aside from the various depictions, there also exists in the Hebrew Bible contradictory versions of Yahweh's acts in history and the lives of the Israelites, and we often see Yahweh's moral code change according to various speechwriters:

(1) Yahweh approved of 'Jehu's killings (cf. 2 Kings 9-10).
(2) Yahweh denounces 'Jehu's massacre (cf. Hosea 1:4)

Jehu's coup is of particular interest to me as I have dealt with it in my master's thesis (*The Roots of 'Jehu's Coup: A violent Story of Religious Zealots, Retributive Justice or International Politics, 2017),* and I also echo some of Gericke's sentiments regarding the flip-flopping when it comes to addressing Jehu's coup between multiple sources. These are the few instances that we can quote in building the argument on the deconstruction of realism in Old Testament theology, although the project is much more complex, as we will see, than simply pitting contradictory texts against one another. This method aids preliminarily in spelling out the ontological implications of what the traditional interpretative approaches have conveniently left untreated.

Yahweh becomes personal, anthropomorphic, or transcendental based on who is writing and the source (Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, or Priestley sources).[1] This has implications for ontology since a cross-reading would mean

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[1] See, *Sources of the Pentateuch: texts, introductions, annotations.* Fortress Press, 1993. For a more in-depth assessment of the sources of the Pentateuch.

that one source would consider another source problematic since the Yahweh in question, in both views, is starkly different. The originals would even go to the extent of rendering the other's theology unorthodox (GERICKE 2004, 38). This is evident even in our modern-day treatment and how we have shaped monotheistic religions. This is a truth that all critical scholars know, says Gericke, but true conservative scholarship seeks to suppress that the foundation of monotheism is structurally aided by the ontological status we afford deities.

As I have argued elsewhere, 'Gericke's argument in this first installment culminates in the following (MTSHISELWA & MOKOENA 2018, 2-3):

> Gericke's view implies that a deity has the misconceptions and primitive understanding of nature often found in humans. Furthermore, 'YHWH's ideas are informed by myths and legends like those of human speechwriters. The YHWH of the Old Testament possessed the same cultural and traditional beliefs as his devotees, which never seemed to transcend the ideologies of the Old Testament itself. The knowledge that YHWH had of the world and humans was relative to the speechwriters of the ancient biblical texts. YHWH had no knowledge of the universe and how the Earth was created; he did not know astronomy (the moon is not the source of light); he did not understand human physiology (humans are not made of clay), and he did not know the natural world before Homo sapiens and mythical creatures. What we have in the Old Testament is anthropomorphic projectionism. 'Gericke's argument is plausible because the YHWH of the Old Testament seems not to be in tune with reality, life systems, and order. The YHWH of the Old Testament appears to be only following everything his speechwriter's accord YHWH. YHWH wants the Israelites to invade occupied land (Jos 1–12), a modern-day violation and denial of human rights; YHWH orders the killing of children (2 Ki 2:23:24; Gn 22:1–12; Nm 16:41–49). Gericke (2003:153) affirms that although it is embarrassing to conservative scholars, YHWH, as depicted in the ancient biblical texts, is a construct created by humans for ideological, theological, and social purposes. He exists only in literal texts for those literal texts.

Part II – Philosophical Criticism as an Exegetical Methodology
In the discussion, I introduced how a philosophy of religion can be used as an auxiliary discipline in Old Testament studies. Gericke distinguished the understanding of reason from speculation and proposed a new approach in his case against realism in the philosophical quest of Yahweh. He refers to this method as a neologism in a meta-theoretical discourse called *critical philosophical analysis*. However, critical philosophical analysis is an umbrella term that was 'coined to designate, generally, the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible from the perspective of loci on the agenda in the *philosophy of religion*. Under this rubric, a distinction was made between *two types* of PCA, i.e., (1) *philosophical criticism* - a form of biblical criticism involving the operation of PCA on the level of exegesis; and (2) *philosophy of Old Testament religion* – a larger-scale type of PCA analogous to Old Testament theology' (GERICKE 2006, 1178).

This method is essential for this project since philosophical criticism is absent from various Biblical criticism methods (i.e., source criticism, social-scientific criticism, feminist criticism, et al.). The reasons for that have been expounded on, so we will proceed to the method. Gericke (2006, 1181) explains that due to its efficiency, philosophical criticism works in such a way that it provides philosophical perspectives on religious beliefs. This is very important to note as it is often mistaken that philosophical criticism is religious criticism. It is a particular way of reading Old Testament texts. So, it is essentially an assessment of claims and assumptions that can be identified as follows;

1) It assumes that Biblical texts are not philosophy.
2) The Biblical texts in question contain discourse of particular religious traditions.
3) These religious traditions provide us with access to the Old Testament's ontological, metaphysical, moral, epistemological, and theological assumptions and beliefs.

To elucidate more clearly how philosophical criticism functions as an exegetical method, Gericke (2006, 1182-1183) offers a few steps in the interpretive process; (a) choose a text, (b) identify the implicit assumptions or beliefs, (c) abstract the assumptions from the text, (d) reconstruct the data, (e) recognize what philosophical questions this data might raise, (f) discern what fits into the agenda of philosophy of religion, (g) decide what issues in the agenda to discuss and the lastly, (h) discuss in-depth the specific philosophical problems identified with a particular passage in the Old Testament.

Part III- Does Yahweh Exists? Towards a Philosophy of Old Testament Religion
Since the Old Testament philosopher is concerned with the nature of Yahwism, revelations of Yahwism and religious experiences in Old Testament Yahwism, the logical question for one to ask is this, 'does Yahweh then exist?' How can this be determined, and what is the relation between the texts and reality? Taking from his illustrative arguments, I am going to demonstrate that, according to Gericke (2006, 47), the ontological status of Yahweh is null outside of the texts of the Old Testament. The ontological perspectives that assist in drawing up this argument are; naïve realism, critical realism, and non-realism (or anti-realism).
By way of 'symbolic-logical notation, Gericke (2006, 49) illustrates the ontological status of Yahweh as follows:

The use of logical connectives/operators, variables, and predicate constants are used with specific reference to the symbolic logical notations;

R_0 realism
R1 naïve-realism
R2 critical-realism
R3 non-realism/anti-realism
$\forall x$ all (universal quantifier)
$\exists x$ some (existential quantifier)

x   representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse
x^1 God in extra-textual reality
x^2 historical-cultural persona of God
y   symbolic personifications of human ideals, etc.
=df   is defined as (equals by definition)
=   equals (identity)
⊃   if…then (entailment)
∧   and (conjunction)
∨   or (disjunction)
~   is not (negation)
≡   if and only if (material equivalence)

These logical notations will assist us in determining the ontological status of Yahweh, primarily what the depictions by the speechwriters of the Old Testament are and not necessarily whether or not Yahweh exists. If realism in the Old Testament is defined as "any view that assumes or claims intra-textual representations of Yahweh refer to an extra-textual deity who exists independently of the discourse depicting" (GERICKE 2004, 33), a realist perspective of Yahweh versus that of the non-realist/anti-realist as depicted in the Old Testament can be constructed as follows:

$$R\ 0\ (x) =df\ (\ \forall x)\ (x) \supset ((x1 \wedge x2) \wedge \sim (\ \exists x)\ (x \equiv y))$$

In other words, realist representations of Yahweh in the old testament are as follows; *realism representations of Yahweh in intra-textual discourse equal by definition all representations of Yahweh in intratextual discourse if x1 God in extra-textual reality and x2 the historical-cultural persona of God and is not some representations of Yahweh in intra-textual discourse if and only if they are symbolic personifications of human ideals.*

The same is true for naïve realism, which states that; "*all representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse are equal to (literally depict) God in extra-textual reality. Moreover, it is not the case that some representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse are there if and only if they are cultural-historical personae of God or merely symbolic personifications of human ideals, values, and commitments."* (Gericke 2006:52). *Which can be displayed as follows;*

$$R1\ (x) =df\ (\forall x)\ (x) \supset (x = x1) \wedge \sim (\ \exists x)\ [x \equiv (x2 \vee y)]$$

A realistic critical analysis of the ontological state of Yahweh claims that (GERICKE 2006, 53); "*all representations of YHWH in intra-textual depictions are equal to (literally depict) cultural-historical personae of God. Moreover, it is not the case that some representations of YHWH in intra-textual discourse are there if and only if they equate with either God in extra-textual reality or because they are merely symbolic personifications of human ideals, values, and commitments"*, which can be displayed as;

$$R2\ (x) =df\ (\Box\forall x)\ (x) \supset \Box(x = x2) \wedge \Box\sim (\ \exists\Box x)\ [x \equiv \Box(x1 \vee \Box y)]$$

The common denominator in all three symbolic logical notations above is that the extra-textual existence of Yahweh seems in naïve and realistic depictions of Yahweh to rely heavily on the intra-textual descriptions. The idea that Yahweh is possibly just a representation of human ideals does not favor since symbolic personifications cannot equal the historical-cultural persona. Therefore, Gericke (2006, 54) argues that realists and naïve realists view texts as social photographs, as a *window.* So, while the critical realist views the text as a *painting*, a non-realist thinks of it as a *mirror* (i.e., not reflective of anything behind it); according to non-realist readings of the Old Testament text, Yahweh does not exist.

Aribiah Attoe on the Existence *(and/of)* the Thing We Call God
After assessing the ontological status of Yahweh, I now look at Aribiah Attoe's argument on the existence of the thing we call God. It is not by mistake that Attoe premised his title with 'Existence' and grammatically separated it, with the conjunction 'and', from 'the thing we call God'. From Attoe's (2022, 15) premise, we can also extract various modes in which being emanates from God by examining God's existence. The differences are warranted since Gericke is an Old Testament scholar, Attoe is a philosopher, and I, on the other hand, strive to be a bit of both. Unlike Gericke's examination, which sought to critically examine the ontological status of Yahweh from the representations of his speechwriters, Attoe wants to define what being is and what constitutes existence first.

I would love to dwell on the ideas of Attoe and how he battles with the questions of existence. And although he does not separate them in his assessment, I want to look at *the existence of what we call God*. He has contributed to the field by asking questions about the traditional conceptions of God and several ontological issues. Although a more significant part of his archive has been on meaning, I am particularly drawn to one of his recent 'god talks' in conversation with Thaddeus Metz in an article titled "Why the divine purpose theory fails: A conversation with Thaddeus Metz". This article was a response to a section in Metz's recent book on "God, Soul and the meaning of Life." I will not dwell much on the larger project but focus on the essential interventions that Attoe contributed to the conversation; I am not being biased because I am a theologian, it is for coherence.

Attoe (2022, 15) describes God as a "regressively eternal and material entity." But the regressively eternal nature of God does not mean that God is "not a thing in the world" because that would then mean that our critical faculties would not capture God, and that would also mean that our conscious gaze, as Attoe (2022, 21) states, cannot yield any result.

To search appropriately for God, we must look to nature and its mechanisms. Drawing on insights from Mbiti (1975), Attoe (2022, 22) echoes the same sentiments that God reveals Godself in/through nature since the first way Africans have come to believe in a God is by recognizing the process of creation. Attoe asserts that a prior actor is needed for future actors to emerge, that is, the necessity of an antecedent thing for the existence of a future consequential thing.

Clues to the possible nature of God as a thing-in-the-world, according to Attoe (2022, 26), are found in pre-existing things because when we ask where they emanate from, then we can be able to ask who/what created them. And that is why Attoe finds the *ex nihilo* contradictory because of his belief that things must first exist before we can perceive them as things, so this necessary process in the out-of-nothing theory seems to be absent.

Unveiling the Face of God (P1 – God as the First Cause)

Attoe's (2022, 30) first proposition has established that he believes God to be a regressively eternal entity. He also shows that God poses itself as the enduring entity from which all other entities emanate. Since the things that derive from God are finite, God needs to be progressively eternal (infinite) to avoid the catastrophic event of all little things coming to an end. Attoe makes a fascinating observation based on this premise, what about things that cannot be labelled either finite or infinite based on the categories we use to observe, like energy? Since energy can neither be created nor destroyed as the first law of thermodynamics dictates, can it be that energy is our God?

The induction of God into the spiritual world presents us with a new set of challenges. The issue is not nomenclature but the essence of this first property. Spiritual, immaterial, etc., are the many predicates we allude to the unseen forces we call deities. However, the only consensus is that all imply an unseen transcendental entity. Attoe brings our attention to the fact that a conceptual history of these terms is nonetheless essential because it assists us in not reiterating misrepresentations held about African Philosophy as being preoccupied with mysticism (not that there is anything wrong with that, it is just how it is spelt out that makes it devoid of any critical assessment that because alarming and problematic).

This is why it is essential to recognize how Attoe himself fashions the meanings of his terms and, in this case, what materiality and immateriality mean to him. Noteworthy, in Attoe's (2022, 33) view, is that (1) material does not always have to denote that which can be seen with the naked eye, and (2) materiality lies in God's self-capacity to impress itself on the conscious mind in two possible ways; direct impressionability and indirect impressionability. On the one hand, a thing makes itself aware to the senses of the conscious mind; in the second instance, an item can, through other things, impress the conscious mind by way of logical necessities. So Attoe's definition of the material allows him to make several conceptual moves. He can account for things at the macro-level and sub-atomic level. This is the basis of Attoe's argument to account for a God that does not have to be necessarily immaterial to be a thing in the world. As he alluded to in the title of his book, this is indeed laying the groundwork for a new kind of metaphysics.

Does God Exist? (Material Existence as Property 2)

I want to quote Attoe (2022, 34) at length here:

> From the preceding, we can make the following claim. The entity we call God, which we have described as (at least) regressively eternal and necessarily so, has impressed itself on the conscious mind and stands as the first cause from which other things-in-the-world emanate. If this is the

case, we must admit that God is not spiritual (whether in the immaterial or psychological sense) but a full-blown material entity. Thus, I add another property attributed to this entity we call God: P2 The thing *we call God is a material entity.*

Without overstating, when you read between the lines of his acceptable arguments, the question he tries to answer is not primarily concerned with whether a God exists; he is mainly worried about *what kind of God* lives within his African metaphysical system.

The two arguments are consistent about the same thing, the insistence on a metaphysical assessment of the existence of the thing we call God. This is important to the conversation because conventional arguments, especially in Biblical studies, have not had that much of an interest in the ontological status of Yahweh. It has mainly been assumed that the God of the Hebrew Bible lives unquestionably within and beyond the confines of the ancient text. That has been a postulation upheld without any proper index.

Conclusion

In Gericke and Attoe, I see an epistemic break, a difference. They have challenged me to think of ontology and metaphysics differently and broadly. I appreciate when Attoe speaks of a metaphysical abyss because it captures what has been chiefly of continental philosophy and biblical hermeneutics. I contend that the conversation can continue as I challenge myself further and theorize on being, existence, and this thing we call God.

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