

**Jewish Philosophical Theology:  
A Brief Overview**  
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The Hebrew Bible occupies an anomalous position on the contemporary academic landscape. The field of biblical studies produces a steady stream of works on the compositional history, philology, and literary character of the biblical texts. But the *ideas* that find expression in the Hebrew Scriptures – the metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy of the biblical authors – have seldom been explored by the field of biblical studies in a systematic fashion. At the same time, philosophers, who see the study of ideas as the principal purpose of their work, tend to assume that the biblical texts fall outside the scope of their discipline. The result is that despite general agreement that the Bible has had an unparalleled significance in the history of the West, its ideas have remained, until recently, largely beyond the reach of sustained academic investigation.

Much the same can be said about the other classical Jewish sources as well: The Talmud and Midrash seem frequently to explore subjects of intrinsic philosophical interest. Yet these texts remain all but unknown to philosophers, political theorists, and historians of ideas.

The ongoing neglect of the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and Midrash by philosophers is especially striking given the rapidly growing interest in theological questions in philosophy departments throughout the English-speaking world. Over the last generation, Christian philosophers have labored successfully to introduce “philosophical theology” (or, more recently, “analytic theology”) into philosophy departments at leading universities. In keeping with longstanding Christian philosophical tradition, this discipline has focused on *a priori* argumentation concerning the concept of God as “perfect being,” and has usually been conducted with little reference to the Bible. As a consequence, philosophical theology has until now continued the larger pattern of academic neglect of the ideas of the Hebrew Scriptures and other Jewish sources. This has also meant that philosophical theology has had limited opportunity to engage with Jews, whose tradition of philosophical and theological speculation is largely text-based.

This is unfortunate, because it seems likely that philosophy as a discipline could contribute much to the elucidation of the Hebrew Scriptures and classical rabbinic texts. The law-oriented emphasis of much traditional rabbinic exegesis has meant that these texts have not usually been investigated using philosophical tools and with an eye for philosophical questions. So we can ask: What do philosophical questions and the answers that have been given until now teach us about the Bible and Talmud? What, for example, does the nature of the mind or language, reality or

morals, as understood by philosophers, have to offer us in enhancing or extending the insights from these traditional sources? Even the involved legal discussions of the Talmud may be understood better in light of analytic tools philosophers have developed in areas such as personhood, agency, causation, or law.

In November 2010, the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation, launched an initiative aimed at developing a Jewish “philosophical theology” that will seek to advance the study of the ideas of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Talmud and Midrash in the academic setting. This initiative is part of a broader “Analytic Theology” project of the Templeton Foundation, which will support Christian centers for philosophical theology at the University of Notre Dame and the University of Innsbruck, Austria. The Jewish component of the project envisions the development of a uniquely Jewish discipline that will use philosophical tools and methods for examining classical Jewish sources. Although such studies will by their nature also touch on subjects that will be of interest largely to Jews, they will, in general, be conducted with an eye to bringing philosophical readings of classical Jewish texts into dialogue with the Christian and post-Christian philosophical approaches that are more familiar to mainstream Western philosophy.

The most obvious methodological questions facing the reading of Jewish sources for their philosophical content are those related to the narrative form of much of the Bible and Talmudic literature. The core texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as of the most philosophically accessible parts of the Talmud, the *aggada* (rabbinic stories), are narrative in form – and since most philosophy is not conducted with respect to narrative genres, misconceptions abound. For example, the classical Jewish emphasis on narrative forms has contributed to the common view that the biblical and rabbinic texts are principally concerned with the particular and the particularistic, at the expense of truths that are of universal validity and interest. But this is mostly a myth. As a series of recent works by philosophers, political theorists, and Bible scholars have shown, the biblical and talmudic texts very frequently enter into discussions of subjects that are both accessible and of potentially significant philosophical interest to individuals well outside the circle of committed Jewish readers (see bibliography below). Gaining access to these ancient Jewish philosophical teachings does, however, require developing appropriate methods for dealing with the philosophical elucidation of biblical and talmudic narrative – something that has been done with increasing success over the last twenty years, particularly in treatments of the ethics and political philosophy of the Hebrew Bible.

Similar issues arise with regard to the most significant corpus of non-narrative materials in the Hebrew Scriptures: The orations of the prophets. Here, too, the principal question is how to combine what would usually be considered literary analysis with careful philosophical investigation. Like the Athenian

philosophers, the prophets were inclined to present their views in the form of arguments. But they did not write their arguments out in prose. Rather, they elaborated their views principally by way of metaphors – not parables whose purpose is to hide the author’s true meaning, but the opposite: Figures of speech meant to make their arguments more readily comprehensible to a broad audience. This means that prophetic oration is a form of poetic disputation, and as with biblical narrative, contemporary philosophers need to invest a bit of care in learning to analyze this genre of works before the philosophically significant aspects of their treatments of human psychology, morals, and social thought are brought to the surface.

An additional issue of central importance to Jewish philosophical theology is the relationship between the language of the Hebrew Scriptures and the metaphysical scheme or schemes underpinning biblical thought (and analogously with respect to the Talmud and Midrash). This is a contentious issue, but it requires revisiting nonetheless. As is well known, the 1950s saw the rise of a “biblical theology” movement among Christian theologians whose purpose was to attempt to reconstruct classical Hebrew metaphysics by means of techniques based on the analysis of biblical concepts as reflected in classical Hebrew usage. The partisans of the biblical theology movement were theologians, however, and not philosophers, and in many cases their work was more suggestive than it was an exercise in careful philosophical construction. And in the 1960s, the entire enterprise was brought to a halt after Bible scholars claiming superior knowledge in linguistics and Near Eastern languages were able to show that some of this work was spurious. (See bibliography below.) This derailing of the Christian biblical theology movement did not, however, succeed in resolving the questions that had been raised concerning the possible radical divergence between the metaphysical presuppositions of the Hebrew Bible and those of Greek philosophy. Indeed, many of the most important claims made at the time remain unrefuted, and a more careful study of this terrain by philosophers may yet produce a more responsible understanding of classical Jewish concepts in metaphysics, mind, and language.

Both the question of studying the biblical narratives as philosophy and the proposed relationship between biblical language and the metaphysics of the biblical authors are subjects that have been touched upon in the past by philosophers and theologians in the tradition of French and German philosophy. But this project aims to achieve more than has been possible within the continental tradition in at least two important respects:

First, treatments of the Hebrew Scriptures and other Jewish sources by the Franco-German tradition of philosophy and theology have often been marred by an obscurity that is not only stylistic. In fact, treatments of the Hebrew Bible in the continental philosophical and theological tradition have at times been so

loose and impressionistic as to leave the reader uncertain as to whether something significant has in fact been said about the original texts or not. The present project will seek to correct the drift toward obscurity in Jewish philosophy and theology by encouraging scholars and thinkers who demonstrate an ability to write with clarity, consistency, and carefulness.

Second, much of continental Jewish thought has followed German liberal theology in emphasizing the view of religion as a reflection of human “inner” experience, rather than as an effort to understand anything about the true nature of reality. This alienation of theology from that which is actually thought to be real or true has led to the crisis in biblical theology described in Langdon Gilkey’s famous essay “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language” (1952) – in which he speaks of the sense of irrelevance and vacuousness that clings to a discipline of biblical interpretation that has nothing to say to mankind about that which is in fact real. The present project will seek to encourage scholars and thinkers whose interest is not merely in developing another subjectivist interpretation of religious experience, but who wish to go beyond this, seeing the classical Jewish sources as potentially a source for knowledge concerning that which is real or true.

In this context, it is worth saying something about the place of the “history of ideas” in this project. There exists within academia an impulse to attain a painstaking reconstruction of ideas from different historical periods simply to get the historical record straight. While this kind of historical work can be fascinating, it should not be the sole purpose of work done within the discipline of philosophical theology. The aim of this project is ultimately to attain philosophical insight into traditional texts where such work is capable of shedding light on, and being illuminated by, questions of current importance. Preference will therefore be given to research that can be of obvious interest to contemporary philosophy and theology.

Questions that philosophers and scholars from related disciplines may wish to investigate in the context of this project include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Are there distinct biblical or talmudic concepts of *truth*, *being*, *justice* or *love*?
2. Do the the texts of the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and Midrash have a distinct approach (or approaches) to familiar questions in ontology, epistemology, philosophy of language, or hermeneutics?
3. Do the Bible or classical rabbinic sources have a distinct approach (or approaches) to philosophical and/or scientific topics such as human nature, the nature of the mind, or the nature of the spoken word? To what do the biblical or talmudic concepts of the *soul* refer?

4. What are the biblical or talmudic views of reason and argument? Of the search for wisdom, knowledge, and truth? Of conscience? Of science? Of prophecy?
5. To what do the biblical or talmudic concepts of *God* refer? Is God to be understood as *perfect being*? And if not, then what?
6. Are there distinctive biblical or talmudic approaches to morals? To self-improvement and virtue? To law? How does the classical Jewish concept of *holiness* differ from its meaning in other traditions, and how is it related to goodness?
7. Does the central narrative sequence of the Bible (Genesis to Kings), if considered as a whole, raise questions of philosophical significance? What about the corpus of the later prophets (Isaiah to Malachi)? The biblical compilation as a whole? Is there a distinctive biblical approach to history? To narrative? To time?
8. Do particular biblical stories or books of the Bible, Talmud, or Midrash advance philosophically significant teachings or points of view? What about the “biographies” of particular biblical or talmudic figures?
9. What do the various genres by means of which the biblical or talmudic authors express their ideas (narrative, law, prophetic oration, etc.) tell us about the content of those ideas?
10. How do biblical or classical rabbinic concepts, issues, and viewpoints compare with those of ancient Greece? Of the ancient Near East and India? Of later Western philosophy, including modern philosophy?