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# A Biblical Nota Bene on Philosophical Inquiry

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**Abstract:** What makes Christian philosophy *Christian*, and not merely theist? This brief essay argues that inquiry, as portrayed across Scripture, demonstrates the ability to discern novel instances of patterns learned because one is grounded in both the particular history of Israel and the all-of-life practices of the Torah—later revised by the New Testament practices. Minimally, the biblical logic on this question requires that our inquiry stems from the particular teaching *and* practices prescribed from Moses to Jesus. Christian inquiry does not necessarily derive from an inward spiritual/mental realm, but is primarily depicted as guided and embodied practices that shape the community to develop discernment, or what Scripture calls “wisdom” (Hebrew: חכמה; Greek: σοφία). A note on biblical methodology ensues my conclusions.

The question of the Bible’s own philosophical understanding has been revived in recent works by philosophically savvy biblical scholars and biblically savvy philosophers.<sup>1</sup> A new program unit—Hebrew Bible and Philosophy—has been created within the Society of Biblical Literature, dedicated to exploring specifically philosophical topics in the Hebrew Scriptures. Although such topics have always been present in Jewish and Christian scholarship (e.g., theodicy in Job, epistemology in Proverbs, metaphysics in Genesis, etc.), the question of the Christian philosopher’s position in reference to Scripture must be defined. More specifically, what makes Christian philosophy *Christian*, and not merely theist?

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jaco Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing: A Scriptural Epistemology of Error* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade Books, 2013); Ryan O’Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom in Literature*. *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments Band 225* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); Mary Healy and Robin Parry, eds., *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007); Michael Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2005).

Briefly, I will proffer that the Christian Scriptures portray proper thinking that avoids error—exploring the nature of things *as such*—as an activity beginning in submission to the particular embodied practices of Christianity. The biblically prescribed practices then foster the ability to discern general patterns in reality. However, Scripture describes this pursuit as *an ability* to see the reasonable nature of things *as such*. And, this ability derives from lived practices. Just as we can only grasp the reasonableness of basic mathematics after repeated embodied practice with the concepts (e.g., working out problem sets over and over under the tutelage of an instructor or book), the Scriptures depict the philosophical task as one arising out of guided practice. This practice initially happens under the prophet’s authority (e.g., fasting, praying, festivals, civic responsibilities, sacrificial hospitality, etc.) and later through the guidance of Scripture (e.g., the rediscovered practice of Sukkot through Nehemiah’s public reading of Torah, Passover in the Gospels, etc.). Saying that knowing evinces an ability, a skill honed by practice, collapses the standard trichotomy—*knowing that*, *knowing how*, and *knowing who*—where *knowing how* appears requisite for *knowing that*.

Hence, defining “Christian philosophy” is actually clarifying a biblical epistemology: How can we arrive at a confident understanding of the nature of things *as such*, and in a way that reflects our Christianity? In the last century, we have come to think about philosophy as operating either in the specific topographies of lived life (the Continental tradition) or the general claims about the nature of reality (the Analytic tradition). As part of a larger multi-volume research project on biblical epistemology, I hope to show at a minimum that Scripture reiterates two claims throughout:

- 1) the people of God must be grounded in specific narratives and practices, and
- 2) that grounding creates the ability to discern the general nature of things.

When Christians embody that submissive process under the Scripture’s guidance, the fruit of the process is called “wisdom” (LXX: σοφία), philosophy’s traditional prize.

### **Reason Grounded in History and Practice**

First, biblical inquiry is portrayed as the ability of Israel to discern a novel instance of a learned pattern because she is grounded in a particular history. How is she grounded? (Consider the authentication of the prophets, including Jesus.) If the Israelites needed to be confident of anything in the Old or New

Testaments, it was their ability to distinguish orthodox from unorthodox prophetic instruction. It was literally a vital epistemic skill—distinguishing long life from cannibalistic death and blessing from curse (cf. Deut 28:1–68; 30:15–20).

Notably, prophets are not identified in Deuteronomy as true or false, in and of themselves. Instead, Deuteronomy 13 and 18 warn Israelites that authenticated prophets will be sent to test them (Deut 13:1–3). Test them concerning what? Many prophets will be authenticated through extraordinary means, but Israelites must be able to discern when an authenticated prophet speaks truly according to the Torah of Moses. In other words, prophets cannot be discerned by their ability to enact signs and wonders, but by the people’s savvy in evaluating the prophet’s instruction according to the particular historical instruction found only by practicing and reflecting on the Torah of Moses. How do they develop this savvy according to Deuteronomy? By keeping the Torah, its rites and ethical practices of hospitality, justice, sacrifice, and more.

Jesus himself appears ever aware of this necessity to practice and reflect, consistently quoting and alluding to the Torah as the prescriptive authority to which he himself submits: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39), “Do not hate your brother in your heart” (cf. Lev 19:17; Matt 5:21–22). Jesus grounds his teaching in the particular history of Israel and Moses’ teaching: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law (Torah) or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt 5:17–18). Indeed, this is exactly why Luke praised the Berean Jews in the book of Acts (17:10–11): the Bereans inspected Paul’s teaching against the Hebrew Scriptures.

In those Deuteronomic commands about future prophets, Moses circumscribes the authority of all future prophets to his own teaching. Of equal import, his teaching acts as the authority who guides Israel to discern such things in the future through their reflection upon and practice of Torah. Reasoning, then, is not grounded in considering a rule or definition for who is and who is not a prophet. Rather, the history of Israel, as captured by and lived through the Torah, funds the reasonableness of a future prophet’s teaching. In short, the Israelites are not left with a categorical description of prophets *as such*, for no definition could guide them sufficiently. Israel does possess, however, a sufficient description of prophets *who should be heeded*. Again, the savvy to discern whom should be heeded requires the authoritative guidance of Moses’ instruction and the lived reality of Torah participation. Luke reports that a Torah life—animal sacrifice, vegetal sacrifice, festivals, justice to the marginalized, cleanliness, etc.—enables Jesus’ own growth in wisdom (Luke

2:46–47, 52). Luke also later depicts Torah participation as evincing Paul’s commitment to the plan of God for the sake of the Jerusalemite elders in his final days as a free man (Acts 21:21–26).

Second, Moses’ guidance is exactly what reveals the general nature of the patterns seen when individual instances are construed together. While much of current epistemological discussion still centers on knowing propositions (e.g., “*knowing that* ‘H<sub>2</sub>O becomes solid at 32° Fahrenheit.’”), the Hebrew Scriptures command the celebration of festivals for epistemological reasons. Biblical texts even note that this knowledge cannot be known as a stated fact about the world. For instance, Moses instructs Israel concerning the ritualized practice of Sabbath: “Nevertheless, you must keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout the ages, *that you may know* (לִידַע) that I YHWH have sanctified you” (Exod 31:13). We do not need a detailed account of either Sabbath or sanctification in order to see that the phrase “that you may know” (לִידַע) is predicated on Sabbath-keeping.<sup>2</sup>

Even more pointedly, Leviticus indicates that Israel should keep the practice of sleeping in booths during Sukkot (the Feast of Booths) “*in order that the generations may know* (לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ) that I made the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Lev 23:43). Deuteronomy reinforces the epistemological thrust by difference, emphasizing that Sukkot is for Israel’s children “who *have not known* ...” (Deut 31:13).

The example of Sukkot broaches a fundamental question about limiting ourselves to a fact-centered view of inquiry in the biblical literature: If Israel was meant to know facts—consecration by God, sanctification, or that Israel once lived in booths—then why perform the prescribed actions of Sabbath rest or booth-living? Stated differently, if these are mere facts to be known, why cannot the Israelites verbally pass along the facts? The ability to pass along such knowledge is especially crucial considering that this is not peripheral information, rather vital instruction in order to live long in the land without being ejected or destroyed!

One plausible suggestion is that YHWH intends Israel to know something *about* the fact that YHWH has consecrated her. There is some way

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<sup>2</sup> While some will speculate as to what Israel knew by means of Sabbath-keeping (e.g., Durham), Childs observes that in the Tanakh as a canon, “a variety of different reasons were added [to Sabbath-keeping], but no one ever became fully normative, as the continual fluidity demonstrates.” Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*. The Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1974), 415. For a theologically interpreted account of knowledge brought about by Sabbath-keeping, see John I. Durham, *Exodus*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 412–13.

in which Israel needs to discern this truth beyond mere recognition, some insight to be gained only by performing the festivals and Sabbaths. By doing these things, they will see Israel's history—the same set of facts as before their festival participation—differently. In the same way, I see the night sky differently than the astronomer sees it. Her vision of the sky is skilled in a way that mine is not. The difference in our *seeing* cannot be merely attributed to a disparate distribution of the “the facts.” Clearly, the divergence in our visions of the same night sky stems from her being skilled, ensconced in the traditions and ritualized observations of the sky under the guidance of an expert astronomer over time—a lived tradition that I have not experienced. Therefore, I do not see what the astronomer sees—though we are looking at the same sky!—and no conglomeration of her “facts” or a Wikipedia entry can bridge that epistemic chasm.

In brief, the festival rites appear to presume that mere knowledge of the fact is insufficient. Similar to Paul Moser's claims in his recent “Christ-Shaped Philosophy” essay—“Without this experience, one will have a hard time adequately understanding the Good News of God in Christ”—adequate knowing is bridged by experience.<sup>3</sup> However, pushing beyond the broad category of individual experience, the knowledge desired by YHWH and honed by Sukkot participation is the kind that requires particular embodied participation in community in order to see the history of Israel in the correct light. Merely *knowing that* Israel was made to live in booths as an individual does not bridge the gap between what Israel now knows and what her generations need to know—the significance of this history.

### **Discerning the General Nature of Things**

An episode from the Hebrew Bible will be instructive in developing the view that not all acts of knowing are of the same quality. In the book of Judges, God tests Israel and Israelites test God in order to know some transcendent attributes about each other. Judges states that God “might test (לנסות)” Israel because they did not know the wars of prior generations (Judg 3:1–2). The purpose of the test is stated unambiguously, “to know whether they would listen to the commandments . . .” (Judg 3:4). The text portrays God as needing to recognize something about Israel that would be foundational for discerning what kind of people they were—dispositionally speaking. God takes the position of the pedagogue who subjects his pupils to examination in order to

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy: Wisdom and Spirit United,” [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20\(Christ-Shaped%20Philosophy\).pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Moser%20(Christ-Shaped%20Philosophy).pdf) (accessed July 3, 2014), 4.

recognize patterns in their behavior (e.g., are they the kind of people who will generally trust Moses' teaching because of their parents' instruction and their life of Torah practice?). By this test, God moves their invisible and internal dispositions into the visible realm “in order to know” (Judg 3:4). If one follows the story of Judges, they did not score well on the whole of this test.

These divine tests are not unique to Judges. We see the same epistemological goal stated in the Akedah—the binding of Isaac. Genesis 22 opens by telling us: “After these things it happened that God put Abraham to the test (נסה)” (Gen 22:1). When Abraham prepared to kill Isaac, the angel of YHWH announced that recognition was achieved: “Do not raise your hand against the boy ... *for now I know* that you fear God” (Gen 22:12). The motives are patent: God needed to recognize a general attribute about Abraham—his fear of YHWH—and it required a ritualized human sacrifice in order for God to know. Without making any claims about the actual extent of God's knowledge, we can see that this is how the Hebrew authors unashamedly portray YHWH's epistemic process to the reader. Moreover, the employment of ritual to evince knowing does not reside only in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the New Testament, Jesus reifies the role of Israelite prophets by acting as an authoritative guide for his disciples. Unlike “those outside,” Jesus starkly states that the disciples are meant to discern “the mystery of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:10–12). Whatever this mystery is, it certainly is not a discrete item or event. In other words, the mystery is an ability to apprehend all of the particular historical events of Jesus' ministry and the teaching of Moses into an intelligible pattern called the “kingdom of God.” Again, we do not need to examine the content of this mystery. Rather, as we follow the disciples in their perpetual failures to grasp it, we see that Jesus is guiding the disciples through various events requiring their participation. These actions mean to dispose them to discern the nature of this mystery being revealed. In short, there is something that coheres the acts of feeding the thousands, going out to the Gentiles, and the crucifixion of Jesus into the more general nature of the kingdom of God that can only be found out by *doing*.<sup>4</sup>

In these instances, a general understanding about the nature of the kingdom of God *as such* derives from historical and punctuated instances of testing. Just as the scientist generalizes inductively from observable instances to

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<sup>4</sup> I argue generally for this epistemological motif in Jesus' instruction to his disciples in *Biblical Knowing: A Scriptural Epistemology of Error* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade, 2013), 97–112. I provide a detailed lexical and conceptual Markan account of this argument in a forthcoming monograph: *Biblical Theology and Epistemology: From the Pentateuch to Mark's Gospel*. Theology and Philosophy Series (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2016).

transcendent constructs—and then to nomological theory—Scripture's characters are portrayed as moving along a similar trajectory. Moreover, reasoning about the nature of abstract notions such as “what is a prophet,” “what is truth,” or “what is trust” *as such* appears distant from the epistemic goals of the biblical authors. The most easily discerned and repeated employed epistemology in Scripture moves from an authoritatively guided and interpreted experience to understanding the general nature of various relationships.

The above passages are meant to demonstrate the variegated use of ritual and action for epistemic purposes in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. I could also mention other embodied historical encounters for the sake of knowledge, such as Passover or the Lord's Supper. However, these will have to suffice as examples meant to demand further investigation.

## Conclusions

Given the above, what delineates a Christian approach to philosophy from theistic Anglo-American approach? Again, biblical inquiry is portrayed as the ability to discern novel instances of patterns learned because one is grounded in the particular history of Israel and the all-of-life practices of the Torah—later revised in the New Testament practices. While I largely agree with what Paul Moser has constructed in “Christ-Shaped Philosophy”—that real encounters with God by His Spirit shape us for the task of philosophy—I must push further toward a canon-wide development of what that formation looks like.<sup>5</sup> The nature of that Christ-shaping is not always, or even necessarily, inward to outward. Throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, outward practices prescribed by the prophets shape the inward epistemic disposition of Israel and the earliest Jesus followers. Or, some might argue, that outward-inward dualism offers convention more than realism in biblical description, avoiding a works/grace controversy.

The inward-to-outward transformation may precariously presume what Catherine Bell labels the “thinking-acting dichotomy,” which supposes that internal thinking is prior to and expressed through external actions.<sup>6</sup> Under this account, actions merely symbolically express thoughts. However, I contend that the Scriptures are just as often interested in the opposite: that our “outward” habits and rituals shape our “inward” thinking and even our ability to reason. Basically, we need a philosophical account of our habit-shaped thinking, which

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<sup>5</sup> Moser, “Christ-Shaped Philosophy,” 9.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19–29.

Jesus and Paul could recognize and endorse. It must also be robust enough to explain the body's biblical role in inquiry: habit helping to shape reason.

Minimally, the biblical logic on this question requires inquiry to be rooted in the prescribed teaching and practices from Moses to Jesus. In sum, Christian philosophers are *Christian* precisely because they are grounded not in abstract inquiry, but in a particular historical narrative in which current participation is still required. When performed within a local reflecting Christian community, these prescribed practices dispose us to discern patterns, trajectories, and proliferating implications. In our attempts to grasp such transcendent qualities of reality, we use philosophical inquiry heuristically, to captivate and cogitate that which we have discerned. I would like to suggest that the biblical account, on the whole, advocates philosophical inquiry when pursued within a practicing, and therefore reasoning, Christian community.

### **A Note on Method**

No doubt, some will question my claims about philosophical systems native to Scripture. As I recently read, though it's not a rare sentiment amongst philosophers and biblical scholars alike:

The Bible is not a philosophical text; its language does not point unambiguously to any philosophical position. ... I do not think it can fruitfully be mined for philosophical theories.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from the problems associated with discussing “the Bible” as if it were a monolithic text, the above philosopher seems to focus on seemingly insurmountable problems stemming from the ambiguity and plurality of depictions we find as we encounter the biblical texts. However, this sentiment seems to miss the fact that this is precisely what biblical scholars do: try to understand the unambiguous and ambiguous points made by the many and ancient authors of Scripture. That is why biblical scholars work with the ancient languages, literary genres, social conventions, archaeological findings, and more: in order to disambiguate what the biblical authors were saying through the various tongues, cultures, and conventions that shifted throughout the centuries of its writing and compilation. Though I understand the basic point, it only points to the need for scholarship to translate their findings into language and concepts accessible to philosophers.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael L. Peterson & Raymond J. VanArragon, eds., *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 336.

Because this task is necessarily difficult and appears messy, analytic philosophers might deem it as too messy to recover the philosophical positions of those ancient authors—metaphysical and epistemological presumptions that those authors certainly held and critically analyzed. Even Jaco Gericke, who promotes the scholarship of understanding the philosophical ideas of the biblical authors, thinks it best to give up on finding a coherent philosophical system that spans the biblical texts: “We simply need to exchange unified Christian dogmatic [philosophical] systems for complex and chaotic Yahwistic biblical ones.”<sup>8</sup>

Methodological rigor and protocol in biblical scholarship intend to bring ancient ideas to modern clarity. However, Christians bear the burden of a Divine authorship that spans across these variegated texts and unites them. The author of Hebrews says it best in the opening sentence: “Long ago, at many times and *in many ways*, God spoke ...” (Heb 1:1). Though not free from reasonable scrutiny, biblical scholarship provides methods for seeing the authorship of God—one coherent system of thought—spanning across the ages, the prophets, the language, and the plurality of cultures involved in the production of our canon. Although sometimes disputed, this is the task of biblical theology.

This is all to say: The biblical passages that I explored above were not cherry-picked, but resultant of a particular literary-linguistic methodology. This method highlights passages where a theme (e.g., human reason) is clearly present in a passage (both linguistically and conceptually), relevant within the passage (i.e., not tangential), and the author persistently develops that theme. For those interested, I briefly discuss this methodology, what Gericke is now calling “philosophical criticism as a form of biblical criticism,” in *Biblical Knowing*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion*, 227.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *Biblical Knowing*, xv–xxi, 1–21. I have a fuller account of this methodology in a forthcoming monograph titled *Biblical Theology and Epistemology*. Also, Jaco Gericke’s proposal for a new field called “Philosophical Criticism” of the Hebrew Bible shares some methodological affinity to what I proposed in *Biblical Knowing*. Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion*, 199–240.