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Emergence and new concepts of God: Examples from the Old Testament

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Introduction

The first use of the term ‘emergence’ is commonly traced back to the 19th century in the context of British empiricism in the natural sciences. Part of the source reads as follows:

The emergent is unlike its components insofar as these are incommensurable, and it cannot be reduced to their sum or their difference (Lewes 1875:412).

Historians of science consider the above to have been an allusion to an earlier indirect reference to the same phenomenon:

The chemical combination of two substances produces, as is well known, a third substance with properties different from those of either of the two substances separately, or of both of them taken together (Mill 1843:371).

Prior to this, in the context of natural philosophy, notions of emergence are thought to be at least as old as Aristotelian metaphysics (see Aristotle, 2002 [Book H 1045a 8-10]). In the latter context, one finds related notions such as potentiality, final causes and the relations between parts and the whole. Neo-Platonic philosophy later offered another conceptual forerunner in Plotinus’ concept of emanation, according to which the entire hierarchy of Being ‘emerges’ from the One (see Clayton & Davies 2006:4-5).

What is often overlooked in tracing the history of the concept of emergence is the fact that some Greek philosophical notions have precursors in ancient Near Eastern mythology (cf. Griffin, Boardman & Murray 2001:140). For example, in the old Babylonian creation narrative *Enuma elish*, one encounters an account of increasing complexity with divine beings “emerging” from chaotic initial conditions:

When the skies above were not yet named
Nor earth below pronounced by name,
Apsu, the first one, their begetter,
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
Had mixed their waters together,
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds;
When yet no gods were manifest,
Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed,
Then gods were born within them. (Dalley 1991:233)

In line 4 of the poem, the Akkadian term used is *mummu* (here ‘maker’) and this has been interpreted by some not as an adjective designating a function of the goddess Tiamat, but a type of power, specifically of ‘potentialities’ or *entropy* (see Sandars 1971:27). Whether or not this was the case, the fact is that the notion of something emergent is clearly discernible here. And via the Greek counterpart – *Theogony* – reconfigured in Greek natural philosophy, what comes around goes around. The concept of “emergence properties” has become a philosophical term of art (see Wong 2012:n.p.)

According to Corning (2002:18), ‘complexity’ is currently a key concept for theorists in a variety of natural and social sciences (or humanities). ‘Emergence’ is the related term used to describe how complexity is thought to manifest (see Lissack 1999:110-125). Confusingly, however, the technical scientific sense of the term ‘emergence’ is not identical to the semantic field of popular dictionary extensions. A survey of applications will show that ‘emergence’ is a ‘fuzzy’ and ‘polysemous’ concept, the meaning of which varies quite substantially, depending on whether the context is scientific or non-scientific discourse (see Corning 2002:19).

Emergence and religious concepts

Though not unattested in the writings of biblical scholarship, within Old Testament studies in particular the term ‘emergence’ is used mostly in its popular non-scientific sense. As such, it is not meant to include what is commonly considered to be individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the phenomenon to be present, i.e., 1) radical novelty (the presence of features not previously observed in the system); (2) coherence or correlation (meaning integrated wholes that maintain themselves over some period of time); (3) a global or macro ‘level’ (i.e., there is some property of ‘wholeness’); (4) being the product of a dynamical process (evolving); (5) ‘ostensive’ properties, i.e., it can be perceived and 6) supervenience or downward causation (see Goldstein 1999:49-53).

Given the above, it is only to be expected that, as a rule, Old Testament scholars do not distinguish strong from weak emergence (see Chalmers 2002). One will look in vain for jargon referring to a higher-level phenomenon arising from a low-level domain in a way that truths concerning the phenomenon cannot be deduced even in principle from truths in the low-level domain or are unexpected given the principles governing the low-level domain (see Chalmers 2002 for further details).

Supposing, however, the attempted conceptual clarification by Goldstein (1999) and Chalmers (2002) as noted above were to be taken as axiomatic, how may one apply the concept of emergence with reference to the topic this article will be focussing on, i.e. new concepts of God in the Old Testament? Since the genre of our discussion is not that of the natural or social sciences proper but concerns religious language, let emergence be linked with increasing synchronic and diachronic complexity in the Old Testament's conceptions of God as is evident from the different perspectives on Yhwh available in meta-textual discourse. Using this prescriptive definition, Yhwh's emergent properties have been reconstructed from reductive perspectives in popular interpretative methodologies, e.g. in theological, historical, sociological and literary approaches to biblical God-talk (Gericke 2012:200-220).

New concepts of God from the perspective of methodological reductions

As far as new concepts of God in the Old Testament are concerned, this section will focus on the four types of complexity represented by the methodological reductions noted earlier. These are: (1) the development and emergence of monotheism in Israelite religion (in theological reductions); (2) diachronic changes in Yahwistic typologies of divinity (in historical-comparative reductions); (3) alternative social strata in religious practice (in sociological reductions); (4) alternative characterisations of Yhwh (in literary-critical reductions). The discussion to follow will briefly look at each of these in turn.

Theological reduction: emergence in the development of monotheism

Firstly, many biblical scholars speak of new concepts of God by referring to the 'emergence' of *monotheism* in Israelite religion (see Gnuse 1997; see also Smith 2001). And, in fact, various phases of the scholarly debate on the subject can be discerned in the literature. Thus, according to Gnuse (1997), whose outline this section is indebted to, nineteenth-century biblical scholars influenced by notions of Darwinist ideas began describing Israelite religious development as a passage through several stages of evolution. These stages started with simple and primitive conceptions of God and then evolved into

increased intellectual complexity and sophistication until, eventually, ethical monotheism was attained.

Gnuse (1997) also noted how, early in the twentieth century, the application of evolutionary theory in the context of the history of Israelite religion became suspect. From 1940 to 1970, it was the idea of a Mosaic monotheistic 'revolution' that replaced the notion of 'evolution'. On the new view (based on a naïve historical realism) it was argued that new concepts of God developed from a simple monotheism to a complex degenerate syncretism mixing polytheistic beliefs with pure monotheism (see Gnuse 1997).

The theory briefly outlined above was put forward by Christian theologians in the so-called 'Biblical Theology Movement', which itself was driven by the agenda of Continental Neo-Orthodoxy and its hostility towards nineteenth-century idealistic liberal theology's simplistic application of biology's evolutionary paradigms. The slogan of the times (which one finds propounded to this day) was that in the Old Testament we encounter a God who is revealed in a history of salvation or *Heilsgeschichte* (see Gnuse 1997).

In the last quarter of the previous century, the *Heilsgeschichte* model underwent a significant demise. According to Gnuse (1997), mainstream scholarship afterwards increasingly argued that new concepts of God in the Old Testament developed in progressive stages or 'leaps' from the pre-exilic period to their culmination in the supposed absolute monotheism of the Babylonian Exile (586-539 B.C.E.). This position represented an attempted mediation between the idea of a revolutionary monotheism and a gradual evolutionary model (see Gnuse 1997).

Finally and most recently, Gnuse (1997) recounts how, at the end of the 20th century, some scholars began to offer yet another perspective on emergent monotheism. The so-called minimalists concluded that monotheism emerged totally in the exilic and post-exilic eras and that there were no preliminary stages of development in the pre-exilic period. Minimising pre-exilic contributions to the emergence of monotheism, minimalist approaches view literary expressions of pre-exilic monotheism as the later creation of the Jewish community in the Exile and beyond. According to this view, new concepts of God are simply remnants of traditions put together in the Hellenistic period (see e.g., Thompson 1999).

Historical-comparative reduction: emergence as amalgamated typologies of divinity

When we come to historians of Israelite religion working in tandem with comparative ancient Near Eastern religions, we encounter an entirely different dimension of emergent properties in the identity conditions of God in the Old Testament (see Smith 1990, 2001). From this perspective, which deals primarily in typologies of divinity, the process begins with the 'God of

Israel' who was originally not Yhwh, but a simplified version of the Canaanite chief god El (see Dijkstra 2001a). In this Israel, El's consort Asherah probably featured in the family religion and Baal-Hadad was worshiped as the giver of the all-important rain. This was the scenario at the end of the Late Bronze age (see Dever 2006).

New ideas of God emerged when the god Yhwh was introduced into northern Israel as a storm and warrior god by southern tribes such as the Kenites or Midianites (see Van der Toorn et al. 1999). These Yhwh worshippers entered Canaan and developed a relationship with 'Israel'. Yhwh was then re-identified with El, thereby gaining a consort, Asherah (see Dijkstra 2001b). In this pantheon, Yhwh was one of the seventy children of El, each of whom was the patron deity of one of the mythological 'seventy nations'. In the oldest biblical literature from the early Iron Age (12th-11th centuries), Yhwh was a typical ancient Near Eastern 'divine warrior' who led the heavenly army against Israel's enemies (see Steinberg 2009:n.p.).

Another new set of the emergent properties of God can be discerned when Yhwh became the national deity and Yahwism spread to other sections of the population. As Niehr (2010) shows, in the crisis of an imposition by Ahab of Tyrean Baal (probably Melkart, and probably with his consort Tyrian Ashtart) – in the mid-9th century BCE – the prophetic movement rejected the native weather deity Baal-Hadad (probably with his/Yhwh's consort the native Ashtoreth) as un-Israelite. Baal's characteristics were then appropriated by Yhwh (see Steinberg 2009:n.p), who was now worshipped as the supreme god over all others in the pantheon.

A further set of emergent properties in the concept of God can be observed in the 8th-7th centuries. At this point in time, the other gods in the pantheon were stripped of their divinity and the divine messengers gradually became mere expressions of Yhwh's power. By this time (i.e. the 8th and 7th centuries), Asherah and other gods' benevolent properties were assimilated by Yhwh (see Hadley 2000). The Deuteronomic movement of the late 7th century BCE would cast Yhwh in the role of the Divine King ruling over all the other deities (cf. Miller 2000).

Over time, many types of Yahwism became increasingly intolerant of rivals and began to promote Yhwh as God of the entire cosmos, possessing all the positive qualities previously attributed to the other gods and goddesses. With the work of so-called Deutero-Isaiah towards the end of the Babylonia (6th century BCE), the very reality of foreign gods was denied, and Yhwh was proclaimed as the creator of the cosmos and one true God. In the post-Exilic period, a fully amalgamated Yhwh was now often worshipped as the sole god, not just of Israel, but of the whole world.

Sociological reduction: emergence on higher level social strata

As far as social strata are concerned, the Old Testament contains “memories of fundamental shifts in God-experience and god-talk linked to different forms of social organization” (see Gerstenberger 2002). At an elementary level, we encounter the extended family unit in which the deity was like a family patriarch or matriarch. He or she belonged to the group and it is very likely that ancestor worship played an important role at this level of social organisation (see Gerstenberger 2002).

According to Gerstenberger (2002), who is probably the Old Testament theologian most associated with sociological reduction, what is today called a “personal God” was, in ancient conceptions of reality, the leading power guaranteeing the security of the familial group and providing it with guidance. God is the provider of food, housing, and progeny; God is also the healer of sickness and the protector against all evils. The relationship with individuals was personal throughout and there was no great concern for heaven and earth, humanity at large, statehood or international affairs. We can therefore say, at the elementary level of sociologised Old Testament, theology came into being with the problems and achievements of intimate communion within the nuclei of human society (see Van der Toorn 1996).

A second higher level of organisation or complexity is encountered when we come to conceptions of deity on the scale of the clan or village. This was the neighbourhood god who constituted a new and specific type of deity. He or she had nothing to do with tribal or state gods, nor with the protective power of the family. Villagers would venerate a variety of deities other than Yhwh. New theological concepts accompany movement of perspective to a different social structure. Sometime during the first half of the first millennium BC, Israel’s tradition reflects this movement from family to community religion. Exclusive faith in Yhwh had not yet appeared on the scene (see Gerstenberger 2002).

A third level of complexity is visible with the rise of tribal leagues. It is on this level of social organisation that we encounter new concepts of God via the emergence of Yhwh, who was formerly unknown to the wandering fathers. Yhwh began in Israel as tribal deity in the southern/south-eastern deserts and Israel adopted him as a chieftain of war against hostile tribes, city-states or imperial armies (see Grabbe 2010). Very probably venerated in the war rituals preceding and following the call for holy campaigns, Yhwh’s character as a god of war comes out clearly in the Old Testament’s theological conventions, although tradition has worked and reworked them over the centuries (Gerstenberger 2002).

Finally, on a fourth level of complexity we find new concepts of God emerging in the context of the State (see Wyatt 2010). Change to political structures from tribal league to monarchy meant a change in the complexity

of religious structures. There is continuation with the concept of deity from tribal constitutions and also a deep break with this concept.

This is a logical consequence of state religion: the god proclaimed was the god of justice as perceived in village, town, and possibly tribe and (ancient Near Eastern) states. The divine represented the royal arrogance of power and did not support human dynastic interests as much as his own and instead took sides with the subjects (see Gerstenberger 2002).

Literary-critical reduction: emergence in multiple characterisations/metaphors of Yhwh

A fourth reductive approach to new concepts of God in the Old Testament that can be related to the idea of emergence is found in various literary-critical perspectives. Because much of the Old Testament knows nothing of the doctrine of divine simplicity, Yhwh's own character develops from a relatively simple state into a complex system over time (by analogy). Here Yhwh's emergent properties arose over time as a result of conceptual relations, functions, etc. (see Wong 2012:np).

In this reduction, emergent properties of Yhwh are instantiated as we move through different levels of representation according to disparate size scales. On the micro-level we are dealing with new concepts of God in the changing grammar, semantics and syntax within individual verses, either original or redacted. At a higher or molar level, new representations of divinity appear in medium-sized units as, for example, in the god-talk of an entire (redacted) narrative or poem. Finally, at a macro-scale we are confronted with the complexity of new depictions achieved in the discourse spanning entire books of the Old Testament or that are enclosed within transactional traditions, such as the concept of God in the Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic history, the wisdom literature, etc. (see Ryan 2006 on complexity as size or scale-based).

One typical example of reduction in a literary-critical perspective on Yhwh's emergent properties is Miles (1995) with his *Biography of God*. Miles sought to show growth in the complexity of characterisations of Yhwh, whose properties emerged over time. God is seen from his first appearance as Creator and at last emerges as the Ancient of Days. New concepts of God emerge during the unfolding of the plot. One example is that of the deity as a warrior who is by turns destructive and creative, vain and modest, subtle and naive, ruthless and tender, lawful and lawless, powerful yet powerless, omniscient and blind (see Miles 1995).

Another view concerning the emergence of new concepts of God involves the idea of metaphorical juxtaposition (e.g., Mills (1998) who writes about the *Images of God in the Old Testament*). She shows the many faces of the God of Israel encountered synchronically by placing side by side different

– often contradictory – aspects of the deity as represented in different books and combinations of these. Mills allows these books and combinations of books to comment on each other and the deity, the deity who is revealed is multifaceted, the deity who challenges human beings to find his identity as emergent within the diversity of images and language. Complexity therefore arises on the level of the whole of juxtaposed images and emergent properties of Yhwh as Creator, warrior, father, king, shepherd, etc. (see Mills 1998).

In the case of both Miles and Mills, who were used as representative of a literary approach to emergence and new concepts of God in the Old Testament, we encounter a complex system of Old Testament God-talk. The complexity in the God-talk increases exponentially with the number of representations of Yhwh, thus potentially allowing for many new and subtle types of behaviour to emerge.

The complexity of Yhwh's emergent properties in the Old Testament

The application of the concept of emergence in the context of the four reductive methodological perspectives outlined above seems to presuppose a meaning for the term somewhere in between the popular dictionary sense and the technical scientific sense. However, the fact is that emergence proper in the context of complex systems is not simply synchronic and diachronic pluralism as is evidenced above. Merely having a large number of interactions between conceptions of God in different Old Testament texts is not enough by itself to guarantee emergent behaviour: many of the interactions may be negligible or irrelevant, or may cancel each other out (see also Zevit 2001).

The question of whether Yhwh has emergent properties on the scale of the Old Testament as a whole depends on what is presupposed by the reader regarding the perceived ontological status of Yhwh as depicted in the text, particularly since the identity conditions of real and fictional entities are not the same (see Gericke 2012:200-220). On the one hand, if we opt for a critical-realistic reading we are, strictly speaking, not dealing with emergent properties of Yhwh, but with different conceptions of God whose properties are not identical to the sum of what emerges in textual representations. On the other hand, on a fictionalist or non-realist reading, Yhwh is whatever he is depicted as being and perhaps only here we may speak of systemic complexity and emergent properties (see Gericke 2006:47-57; cf. Cupitt 1996:37; Carroll 1991:38).

However, when speaking of God in the Old Testament as a whole, one is not referring to the God of the philosophers as in naïve-realist hermeneutics. Yhwh and his emergent properties involve an abstract entity whose complex character emerges from a folding or twisting of simple elements into complex wholes, the logic of which is para-consistent. This is due to Yhwh's

selfhood being a doorway between multiplicities, where contradictory representations can be acknowledged and left as they are, given that these representations are emerging from so-called 'impossible worlds' (see Zalta 1997:640-660). The God of the Old Testament is an abstract multiplicity whose identity is in constant flux, despite having obtained some consistency for a short duration of narrative space and time (see Deleuze & Guattari 2004:23).

In the language of complex systems, it may be said that, whether or not the concept of God in the Old Testament as a whole can be predicted from the properties of Yhwh as seen from the vantage point offered by different methodological reductions, all this might be missing the point (cf. Comring 2002:11). The whole produces unique combined effects, but these effects are co-determined by the interactions between the whole and intra-, inter- and meta-textual contexts. Ignoring this type of complexity and refusing to view emergence not only with regard to the world in the text, but also with reference to the world in front of it involving the reader's co-creation of meaning would itself be reductionism of a hermeneutical variety.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I argued that theological, historical, sociological and literary perspectives on Yhwh's emergent properties offer reductive perspectives on the phenomenon of 'emergence' with reference to new concepts of God in the Old Testament. Whether we can indeed speak of emergence with reference to new concepts of God in the Old Testament depends on how we define the concept and on the ontological space in which our inquiry is situated. Whatever our vantage point, however, the sum of new concepts of God in the Old Testament yields something radically novel that is not visible on a smaller scale.

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