

# CONFLICTING THEOLOGIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

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There always has been—and presumably there always will be—a certain necessity, on the part of exegetes and interpreters of the Scriptures, to come up with coherent, plausible answers to theological and ethical questions. The questions are contemporary with the interpreter, and the answers have to satisfy them. That means the Scriptures have to be consistent and reliable for the exegete and his or her audience and situation. They must not be ambiguous, because the reader, crediting them with the highest authority, expects clear guidance in matters of faith and practice. At this crucial point the whole Bible, ideally, has to be regarded as speaking with one harmonious voice. Otherwise exegesis, the interrogatory process, could not possibly yield uniform answers to our vexing questions. The exigency to give a clear testimony, then, comes from the interpreter's side, not from the vast and heterogeneous collection of canonical (and deuterocanonical) writings.

All along through the history of interpretation (which began very early within the formative processes of biblical literature itself) there has been a tantalizing resistance on the part of traditional witnesses to be fitted in neatly with any uniform theology or ethos that we, the interpreters ancient

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and modern, wanted and want to extract from them. The great collection of biblical writings coming from centuries of communal spiritual life, always being in flux and always featuring a multitude of layers and voices, proved to be too diversified, too rich, too vivacious, even too rebellious to lend itself easily to any kind of theological systematization, which the many interpreters wanted and needed so badly in their respective environments. Old Testament scholarship in the last decades has partially uncovered the reasons for this diversified picture of theological statements and competing expressions of faith within the Scriptures. Israel's faith and witness have been shaped not only by the meandering courses of history and countless influences from surrounding cultures and religions, but also to a large degree by its own internal social structure, which, of course, in itself suffered time-bound changes and modifications. I want to direct our attention to this latter aspect.

# I

For a long time already it has been recognized in Old Testament scholarship—for example, the Pentateuchal traditions directly testify to that effect—that Israel's faith, with respect to its historical and sociological foundations, is deeply rooted in family religion. Albrecht Alt called the pre-Mosaic stage the "religion of the fathers." Most exegetes in one way or another followed suit, acknowledging a clan-related religion that bore some structural similarities to the later Yahweh faith communicated to Israel through Moses by Midianites or Kenites in the southern steppes.<sup>2</sup> Irmtraud Fischer corrected the patriarchal designations after a thorough feminist examination of the Genesis texts to really mean "religion of the parents" of Israel. I myself have tried to describe the phenomenon of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bernd Diebner, "Die Götter des Vaters," *DBAT* 9 (1975): 21-51; John van Seters, "The Religion of the Patriarchs," *Bib* 61 (1980): 220-33; Matthias Köckert, *Vätergott und Väterverheissungen: eine Auseinandersetzung mit Albrecht Alt und seinen Erben* (FRLANT 142; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

"family religion" in line with Hermann Vorländer, Rainer Albertz, et al.,<sup>3</sup> not only as a precursor of Yahweh faith, but also as an autonomous type of religion known through the ages, and well alive into our own days. Empirical investigations about the specific features of small-group faith in our anonymous, industrial mass society support this view.<sup>4</sup> The testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures is impressively clear. Faith in the "household" god has been expressed within the horizon of family values, hopes, and fears; it has been geared to the survival of the intimate group which worked and lived in a tightly knit union of mutual solidarity. Outside the biblical narrational tradition of family religion the language of individual psalms betrays its deep rootage in small group structures and experiences.<sup>5</sup> Concepts like the personal deity ("my God!"), solidarity and love between supplicant and God, mercy and forgiveness, redemption and salvation have their antecedents in the realm of intimate, personal relationships which are feasible only in small-scale groups. Some narrative and legal traditions directly bear witness to holy places inside the house, with a divine figurine (cf. Exod 21:6), house chapels (Judg 17:4-5), and sacred household objects called "teraphim" being handled—even abused—with ease by women (Gen 31:19, 34; 1 Sam 19:13). The last fact suggests that women probably participated in or were in charge of the holy rites within the house.<sup>6</sup> Archaeological findings in Israelite settlements of the monarchic period, finally, have amply corroborated the existence of house

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<sup>3</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); trans. of *Jahwe — ein patriarchaler Gott?* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988). The latest and most comprehensive monograph on the subject is the volume by Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (SHANE 7; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the doctoral thesis of a Marburg colleague: Ulrich Schwab, *Familienreligiosität* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms* (2 vols.; FOTL 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Gerstenberger, *Yahweh*, 55-66.

cults. Hundreds of figurines (mostly of the type "naked goddess"), little incense stands, and house altars have been unearthed in many a site.<sup>7</sup> And the unobtrusive but very powerful testimony of thousands of private seals dating from the same period is an additional proof of widespread adoration of personal deities within family groups.<sup>8</sup>

Family religion, we may say, is the basic form of faith in the ancient Near East. It represents throughout the millennia the longings and insights of human beings in their efforts to live in accordance and harmony with divine powers. Family faith has persisted through all sociological and religious changes and can be observed through the periods of biblical history, both Jewish and Christian, as well as even today under quite adverse conditions of industrial societies. They, in fact, demonstrate a marked tendency to dissolve family units, promoting extremely individualistic social habits. Still, whenever families in modern times function as interests groups, and whenever they exercise some religious activity, they surely will construct their specific theological outlooks and concepts in accordance with social stratum and personal experiences. Every pastor should be aware of this "family religion" today, which normally does not coincide with congregational or church expectations and teachings.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf., e.g., Urs Winter, *Frau und Göttin: exegetische und ikonographische Studien zum weiblichen Gottesbild im Alten Israel und in dessen Umwelt* (OBO 53; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder* (OBO 74; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987). The debate about the importance of these archaeological discoveries has been going on for some time now; cf. Helga Weippert, *Palästina in vorhellenistischer Zeit* (Handbuch der Archäologie, Vorderasien II, vol. 1; München: Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1988, passim).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the momentous work of Othmar Keel and his staff to publish and interpret all known seals from the area of today's Israel, Lebanon and Syria: Othmar Keel et al., *Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästina/Israel* (4 vols.; OBO 67, 88, 100, 135 [and 125, *Inscribed Northwest Semitic Seals*]; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985-94); idem, et al., *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel* (Introduction and vol. 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995, 1997). See also the condensed treatise of the matter by Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minnesota: Fortress, 1998); trans. of *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole* (3d ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1995).

If we accept a basic autonomy of small-scale group religion, what has been the relationship of the various cultic and religious beliefs extant in other social strata of ancient Israelite societies to that primordial form of faith?<sup>9</sup> Village, town, urban center, tribe, monarchic state, and finally the exilic and postexilic communities in their Palestinian and diaspora configurations come to mind, when thinking of larger social structures.

Israel's beginnings are hidden in the general history of the ancient Near East towards the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium C.E. If we do not cling too much to the theories of wandering groups ("A wandering Aramean was my ancestor," Deut 26:5) and loosely or well organized tribal associations (cf. Gen 29:31-30:24; 46:8-25; 49:3-28; Num 2; 1 Kgs 4:7-19; etc.) the first social structures we can verify archaeologically are villages and small towns in the highlands.<sup>10</sup> Social structures probably were based on clan ties and a growing part of civil and religious organization. From what we can deduce in biblical texts we notice that each settlement had its local shrine<sup>11</sup> where families would celebrate their joint feasts including sacrifices and extensive meals.

First Samuel 1-2 and 9:15-26 give a vivid picture of this type of religious activity, oriented towards uniting the habitational or regional groups and also offering them opportunities for family sacrifices. The

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<sup>9</sup> In general, we have to visualize human development as a progressive conglomeration of small social entities; cf. Darcy Ribeiro, *O processo civilizatório* (5th ed.; Petrópolis: Vozes, 1979). The Old Testament really portrays a particular unfolding of social structures corresponding more or less to that of humanity at large. Cf. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel, its Life and Institutions* (2 vols.; New York: McGraw Hill, 1961); trans. of *Les institutions de l'Ancien Testament* (2 vols.; Paris: Cerf, 1960); Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979); idem, *The Hebrew Bible. A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Weippert, *Palästina in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, 352-54; David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Iron Age* (SWBA 3; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985); Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> In most cases these local sanctuaries were open air installations. Cf. Matthias Gleis, *Die Bamah* (BZAW 251; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997).

sanctuary, with or without temple building, became the spiritual focal point of the groups concerned, without extinguishing domestic cult practices strictly geared toward family affairs. Needless to say, a religion of the small settlement will retain strong interpersonal traits of family religion but transcend the limited interests of individual groups, taking care of common concerns for fertility of the fields and flocks, security over against hostile neighbors, and peace and well-being within the habitational group. We may surmise that the deities invoked at local shrines were not identical with family or personal gods, unless one leading clan offered religious leadership to the whole settlement group (cf. Judg 6:25; 17:5, 10-13; 18:14-19). In consequence of common life and interests, joint cultic celebrations, and a shared divine being and theological concepts, there also came about a new, amplified solidarity among the village people. Typical for that stratum of organization were apparently the civil laws of the Covenant Code (Exod 21:1-22:16) and the most ancient rulings of the Book of Deuteronomy (contained in Deut 22-26) with their concerns for closely related settlement groups, family property, neighborhood responsibilities, conflicts among and damages inflicted by neighbors, marriage customs, and sexual offenses in medium-sized social groups. Exilic polemics of the Deuteronomic writers against local and regional cults (cf. Deut 12-14) are a fairly sure sign that the decentralized way of venerating gods did persist in Israel and Judah at least until the end of the monarchy.

### III

A third level of religious organization can be found in Israel's tribal structure, however uncertain the information we have may be. Judges 4-5, principally, indicates that tribes played some role in the early history of the people. Constructions of a tribal system around the sacred number of twelve units, bound together by a common cult, very probably have been made up post factum, either in the wake of Solomon's alleged administrative division of his territory or in a growing, exilic interest in genealogical lists. Be that as it may, the extant news about tribes existing in pre-monarchic Israel may imply some historical truth. In this case, as

in other related societies, tribes have been composed of consanguinely-related families and clans. They most of all served common interests in terms of trade, inter-marriage, and—most importantly—self-defense.

Small wonder, then, that the deity worshipped by tribal people in the ancient Near East quite often was a warrior-type of god or goddess. Yahweh himself, from all we know, at the beginning was a mountain deity famous for his superior force in battle.<sup>12</sup> The earliest texts of the Old Testament speak to that effect. "Sing to Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea," sings Miriam in Exod 15:21. "So perish all your enemies, O Yahweh! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might." This is the concluding line of the Song of Deborah, an old victory hymn, in which even the stars fight on behalf of Israel, apparently at Yahweh's command (v. 20). And the ancient "incantation" of Yahweh, who is considered to be standing on the ark, is a battle cry: "Arise, O Yahweh, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you" (Num 10:35). Theophanic texts in prophetic and psalmic literature undergird the martial character of Yahweh (cf. Hab 3; Pss 18:8-16 [RSV 7-15]; 77:12-21 [RSV 11-20], etc.). Tribal religion in its authentic form, it seems, did not endure too long in Israel, but the monarchies took over the ideology of Yahweh, the warrior God, making him the supreme national deity.

To venture a brief resume: Obviously, different levels of social organization are functioning in rather diverse ways. While family members in antiquity pursued their daily duties in a densely knit group, bound by personal liabilities and dependencies—a kind of "natural" alliance among consanguineous people (augmented by in-laws, servants, guests) —a village or town society already lives by a more artificial set of rules inspired by concepts like impartial justice, balanced influences, right of the stronger one, due process of law, etc. Both groupings, therefore, are not automatically synchronized in regard to their interests and theological concepts. For example, what in family units is self-evident care for the weaker member (provisions of attention, food, shelter, help) in a community becomes neighborly assistance, expecting repayment, or some

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

form of reflected charity. Tribal cooperation, on the other hand, does function on a higher level of abstraction. The theory of common descent from an ancient eponym helps to heighten the sense of mutual responsibility. But individual interests are not always congruent with the aspirations of a tribal association and its leaders. Conflicts are likely to occur, and some biblical texts in fact point to such disagreements (cf. Judg 5:13-18; 10:1-6).

Moving from these sociological evaluations towards theological beliefs (assuming a deeply contextual fabric for any given theology), we may postulate rather different outlooks on every given level of organization. The name of the divinity venerated in each context is not all-decisive. Theoretically it may be the same. But the identity of each relevant god we may expect to be rather different. The personal god will guarantee his or her adherents the basic necessities of life. At the town sanctuary the deity will be responsible for fertility, law in the gates, and protection of the community. And the tribal god is eager to smash outward enemies and bestow victory and honors on the leading ranks of the organization. Partially at least, colliding interests are at stake and have been undergirded theologically by different "ecclesiastic" bodies and concomitant rituals. In the event that the warrior god of the tribe demanded strict loyalty in fighting such and such enemies, the domestic deity, perhaps under the care of the chief woman, would not necessarily consent and eagerly dispatch the male members of the group for battle. After all, who would know the deliberations of the tribal council and the war leaders? Leadership in war and peace has been an issue, as we glean from Judg 11:1-11. Cultic implications of this problem come to the fore in Judg 6:25-32, although the passage most likely is a late, Deuteronomistic composition. Gideon is described as demolishing a family- and local shrine to implant the cult of Yahweh, the warrior God.

#### IV

The distance from everyday life increased with the emergence of a national state. The fully developed bureaucratic monarchy had its own new structure and its peculiar religious quality. Autocratic states tend to



use very consciously the services of religious bodies, temple administrations, and clergy. They love to glorify the ruling dynasty (cf. 2 Sam 7; Pss 2; 110; 132) and identify it with the state (the claim being that there is no other mediation between God and people possible than that through the royal head of state). They centralize government and cultic affairs as much as possible. They persecute relentlessly everyone who dares to oppose the god-given king, who chooses to resist or to rebel against him (cf. Solomon's political cleansings, 1 Kgs 2:13-46). All these religious measures go hand in hand with a centralization of power in the civil and political realms. In short, over against family, village, or tribal religion the national faith seeks—sometimes militantly—to secure its monopolistic position, at least as far as royal and state interests are involved. Installation of state sanctuaries in Bethel and Dan would be an example of this policy (1 Kgs 12:26-29; cf. Amos 7:10-13). The futile battle of the reformer-kings against local shrines (cf., e.g., 2 Kgs 18:3-7), however, is a posterior Deuteronomistic scheme which may or more likely may not reflect historical events.<sup>13</sup> Typical clashes of authoritarian state-reason with popular ethos are reported frequently, even if in legendary form (cf. 2 Sam 11:1-12:12; 1 Kgs 5:27-32; 21:1-16; an experience given synthetic form in 1 Sam 8:11-17: the king "will take" the best of his subjects for himself). Such examples of conflict betray fundamental differences of moral concepts, and underneath them we may suspect legitimizing theological rationales and distinct concepts of God.

In spite of all we have said to this point, we have good reasons to believe that for the most part religious practices on all four levels of social organization went on more or less peacefully until the end of the monarchies. This is to say: the later (Deuteronomic, Deuteronomistic, prophetic, and chronicles') visions of a unified Israel with a homogeneous faith throughout are a gross simplification, as far as pre-exilic social strata and historical periods are concerned. From what we recognize in the Hebrew Scripture, and may learn from archaeological and

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<sup>13</sup> *Hans-Detlef Hoffmann*, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchung zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung (ATANT 66; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980)*.

other extra-biblical evidence, the worship of diverse deities, according to their distinct functions in different contexts, had been going on without much discussion<sup>14</sup>—rivalries between sanctuaries and occasional clashes between multi-layered theological insights notwithstanding.

Interestingly, since the beginning of the monarchic state in Israel, personal names with Yahweh-elements had been increasingly used.<sup>15</sup> To conclude from this fact, however, that Israel was unanimous on all its social and religious levels in adoring one and the same deity is haphazard. Worship within the different groupings of society has to be distinguished in regard to its functions, goals, expectations, and consequent theological rationalizations. Rainer Albertz once splendidly separated—also on the basis of biblical personal names and using, for example, the concept of "salvation" as a criterion—personal (better: familial) and official faith.<sup>16</sup> The point of difference pertains to the distinct theological structures corresponding to the organization, needs, and aspirations of the relevant spiritual groups. If Yahweh is venerated in family worship he is not the same Yahweh we find in national liturgies. The same is true, as every pastor will confirm, in regard to present-day theological conceptualizations. From ancient times we get additional support in those Israelite inscriptions which differentiate one "Yahweh from Samaria" from another "Yahweh from Teman,"<sup>17</sup> and supposedly from "Yahweh from Jerusalem."

So if we trust biblical testimony, archaeological evidence, and general insights of religious sciences, we have to acknowledge that people in pre-exilic Israel recognized the existence of personal deities: Baal, Anat, Yahweh, Asherah, and various others. Actual worship probably was quite monolatric in each social layer, nevertheless. In addition, some would

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh*.

<sup>15</sup>Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall have no Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS 31, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1986); idem, "Israelite Religion: The Onomastic and Epigraphic Evidence," in *Ancient Israelite Religion* (eds. P. D. Miller, et al., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 157-94.

<sup>16</sup>Rainer Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion: Religionsinterner Pluralismus in Israel und Babylon (CTM 9; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1978)*.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions published first by Zeev Meshel, Jerusalem: Spertus Hall 1978.

address Yahweh in different contexts as a personal, local, tribal, and state God.<sup>18</sup>

## V

The last level of social and religious organization in Israel, very potently visible in the Hebrew Scriptures, is that of the exilic and post-exilic communities. Their importance for the formation of theological concepts cannot be underestimated. This final period of bringing together the so-called Old Testament is the decisive one, because it was then and there—among the Judahites who stayed in the homeland and the exiled ones in Babylonia and Egypt—that most articulations of faith, which in part have stayed influential or dominant to this very day, have been found, formed, and lived by. Belief in the one and exclusive God of Israel, Yahweh, the creator of heaven and earth and the savior and judge of his people and the universe, is the most obtrusive theological insight of that period, and, to wit, of that particular non-state but religiously organized body of people. Our modes of believing and thinking have been shaped to a large extent by those theological concepts. The quest for oneness and exclusiveness present in Christian faith derives from the early Jewish congregations. Basic ethical values come from there as well. In this way we are still very much dependent on the ancient Hebrew writings. They mean to us inspiration and liberation but also, in some respects, limitation and bondage. Thus, we have to become conscious of the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic, prophetic, sapiential, and "priestly" heritage of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well of the later Jewish, apocalyptic, and Hellenistic strands of tradition and to struggle for our own concepts and visions of God.

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<sup>18</sup>There is already abundant literature available on the pluriformity of the divine in ancient Israelite times. Cf., e.g., Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (SBLMS 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990); Walter Dietrich and Martin A. Klopfenstein, eds., *Ein Gott allein? JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte* (OBO 139; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994).

Main characteristics of the theologies of exilic/post-exilic times, as mentioned above, were the exclusiveness and holiness of Yahweh. How do these divine qualities tie in with the social structure adopted by early Jewish communities? The loss of statehood after the defeat of 587 B.C.E. left the Judeans, especially those who were deported to Babylonia, with the option only to organize themselves on a low societal level, in terms of family- and clan relationships or in the form of villages and townships (the Assyrians, some 140 years earlier, had not given this chance to the deportees of the state of Israel). In consequence, defeated Judeans grasped the opportunity to constitute Yahweh-communities wherever possible. They used ancient low-societal experiences to construct their new social setup, remembering, as it were, most of all the pre-state and family traditions. Some elements of the monarchic period lingered on in their thinking, in particular the hopes connected with the Davidic dynasty and the Zion tradition. But the main emphasis, apparently, was on small-scale associations of the past and their encounters with the divinity.

The god whom they remembered best, however, was Yahweh, the forceful one, of tribal and state periods. He alone could guarantee internal unity and protection against the oppressive forces (political and religious) from without. Aggressive politics from the side of the Babylonians and imperial claims of world dominion seem to have been the main motivations for choosing Yahweh and no one else from the whole known pantheon that included minor personal deities. This god Yahweh was able to assume the protective and redemptive functions the new community of believers needed in a pluriform and partly hostile world. His exclusiveness mirrored the necessary alienation from Babylonian society. His holiness partly had the same effect. But, additionally, holiness stands for internal cohesion among the "holy people," for impeccability, equity, and the future consummation of his reign. In this fashion, Yahweh ever more turned—in the theology of a defeated minority group! —into the almighty God of all the extant universe, the creator, sustainer, and consummator of this world. Geared to this majestic official picture of Yahweh, celebrated in new feasts and ceremonies (cf., e.g., the Yahweh kingship hymns in Pss 93; 95-100),<sup>19</sup> was the inside story of Yahweh.

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. Gerstenberger, *Psalms*.

This Yahweh had elected his people and liberated them from Egypt. This Yahweh had provided a land for them to live in and who will again liberate Israel to occupy this land. And this Yahweh also had given the written Torah to Moses and the congregation of Israel in order to clarify their way of life and make them a unified community of faithful followers.

## VI

What are we to make of the diversity of biblical theologies (which could and should be augmented by the multiform witness of the New Testament), existing side by side within society at large or following one upon another, as forms of social life build up and disintegrate? One point should be clear. The long spiritual history of Israel, enriched by some Jewish and early Christian relicts, which found a very scarce sedimentation in the canonized writings, cannot be coerced into one homogeneous theological system. The many faces of God, we may say, are not to be synthesized into one unambiguous and unchangeable portrait. Discovering the discrepancies and the unbelievable richness of socially-anchored theological concepts in the Bible, we become aware that we ourselves are not living (or no longer live) in a homogeneous world. Instead, we recognize pluralities of cultures and religions within our own environment. More than that: Our own roles, expectancies, and obligations are dreadfully divided among ego, family, friends, job and career, hobbies, citizenship, nationality, etc., and, finally, the new ecumenical challenges of a worldwide community encompassing all humankind and God's creation in general.

Facing a fragmented world and a fragmented self like this, we may feel hopelessly overburdened. How should we be able to handle the different roles resting on our shoulders? Can we possibly come to grips with the deeply entrenched interests of our neighborhoods, countries, churches, and pressure groups? What may be the will of the one and unique God, whom we cannot hope to describe correctly, for the different associations of people and for whole humankind? It is comforting to know from the study of biblical texts that the one Deity, whom we have

been seeking since the days of Second Isaiah and before, is being perceived and responded to on all levels of human social organization, within our spiritual tradition and in other religious communities as well. The many images of God resulting from these responses are necessarily overlapping and in part contradictory. They will help us, nevertheless, to take seriously our own experiences with God and the world, to work within our spiritual groups for an authentic concept of who God is to us right now, and to enter into serious discussion with other groups for further theological insights, at home and abroad. In an open-ended ecumenical dialogue between all humans concerned about truth and survival we should be able to approach millimeter after millimeter the final image of God, the one and exclusive truth for his or her whole creation.

Besides the great challenge of standing up on our own feet when talking about God and world (instead of copying formulas of old), we may experience the liberation from age-old pressures to think in terms of oneness and timelessness when reflecting about God. Exegetes and theologians have tended to assume transcendent postures, presupposing that the exclusive Deity was readily recognizable as soon as someone had devised the notion of Oneness and Absoluteness. Discovery of biblical diversities in theology should free us from such preposterous, hideous axioms. Hermeneutically spoken, we simply cannot leave the cage of our temporality and contextuality. All of our affirmations about God, the One and Everlasting, are necessarily bound to our own standpoints and concomitant restricted horizons. Social roots and all that pertains to them are very important matrices of our thinking.

Therefore, we should not burden ourselves with futile efforts to express the absolute and unchanging truth or paint the theological image of an everlasting God. It should be our limited responsibility to articulate the partial and temporary messages of God, to give orientation to the disoriented. Insistence on speaking the full and unrestricted truth normally implies a claim to be the sole proprietor of the said integral vision. To own the right doctrinal affirmation makes me powerful, even almighty, reducing all the rest of human beings to my vassals. This kind of hybris very often is guiding Christian interpreters of the Bible. It should be relinquished under the firm conviction that any biblical testimony is

multilayered,<sup>20</sup> decentralized, and bound to the conditions of its authors and users, just like our own testimony. The logical consequence is not an arbitrary validation of all theological witnesses, or just one, but the responsible search for the right theology at this moment, under given conditions, and the serious endeavor to correlate it to other contemporary theologies.

Our theological zeal, limited in time and space as it really is, should go into the following direction:

- to recognize the relative justification of particular theologies voiced in the Bible, and take them as valuable, inspiring examples of ancient experiences with God
- to strive for more clarity in regard to the God who acts in history, that is, also in our own history
- to discuss with others—being conscious of own social and cultural positions—the priorities of faith and life today and within our own realms of responsibility
- to work patiently and calmly for more justice, more humane development, better preservation of creation, for human understanding and reconciliation, for taming the wealthy and powerful and rescuing that starving one third of the world's population.

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<sup>20</sup>Some Old Testament theologians have gone in this direction, admitting variations and possibly contradictions in the stream of theological testimony. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols; New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1965); trans. of *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (2 vols.; München: Chr. Kaiser, 1957, 1960); also, Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).