

Chapter 9

Contextual Theologies in the Old Testament?

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One Fixed Point in Exegesis

It is a commonplace in historical-critical research: Texts are rooted in specific situations, they are conditioned by contemporary values and outlooks, and every possible sort of interpretation likewise bears the stamp of the interpreter's context. Lip-service to historical change and conditioning, however, in much of Western theology seems to be paired with unflinching convictions to be able, in biblical studies, to catch glimpses of the unchangeability of God. The warnings of Exod 19:21–25; 33:18–20; Deuteronomy 4 and other passages, which imply the incompatibility of Holy and Profane, are little heeded. In effect, most historical-critical scholars to this day neatly split their attention into opposing directions. They admit outward or formal historical changes of texts, ideas, and institutions which, however, leave intact or do not impair an eternal nucleus of substance and meaning. Or, more directly, for example: Concepts of God in the Scriptures may vary, but the very core of all theological discourse, the "One God" remains "the Same" forever and ever. Israel, the people of one, exclusive God, and her institutions are unique and incomparable to any other human group. The land of God and the place of his dwelling are sacrosanct, escaping historical relativity. Some such Archimedean point seems to loom large behind much of alleged Old Testament historical criticism. Burke Long, friend from olden days at Yale Divinity School, has brought among other items these facts to our attention, principally in his sensitive scrutiny of William Albright's work and in his own exegetical research as well.¹

¹ Burke O. Long, *Planting and Reaping Albright* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1997): The underlying rationale of bringing together Old Testament scholars in an influential, normative "Biblical Colloquium" under Al-

It is my intention here to reflect briefly on some aspects and scholars of the German scene, supposedly, at least in the eyes of W. F. Albright and his pupils, so critical in regard to historical facts and so negligent of the "eternal" values of the Bible. Looking at Albrecht Alt, Martin Noth and others, or, for that matter, at some more recent scholars like Werner H. Schmidt, Frank Crüsemann, and Rainer Albertz, one has to ask whether they really mean it when they speak of historical changes and contextuality, social-historical criticism and gender-specific visions of the biblical world. Careful reading of modern OT-exegetical or theological works reveals an astounding degree of very traditional, almost dogmatic lines of thinking when it comes down to some incomparable "essentials" of faith. Contextuality, with all its relativity, quickly vanishes. Almost every one of the large group of historical critics in Europe (including some of the most radical disbelievers?) professes deep allegiance to some underlying, basic, and unchangeable truth to be heeded rather than to be questioned. The oneness and exclusiveness of God is only one example. Concomitantly, the claim is made that fundamental insights into the nature of God, world, and mankind can in fact be copied directly from the Bible, without needing transformatory reflection and re-adaptation because of changing times and circumstances. Basic biblical affirmations are declared or assumed to be exempt from otherwise all-encompassing laws of time and space, cultural diversity and historical change. They simply must not wither or yield to any modifications. If these positions really are behind most of German and European criticism since the eighteenth century, then perhaps the fear of Albright and his pupils with respect to the supposed destructive historians on the continent was entirely unfounded. After this review I want to reflect a little bit on the dimensions and implications of contextuality in biblical studies.

Fathers and Sons in German Old Testament Research

To exemplify my point I offer a few concrete considerations on particular works and ideas of prominent OT historians and theologians.

Albrecht Alt (1883–1956) and one of his most famous pupils, Martin Noth (1902–1968), were both first-class historians, brought up in the true tradition of historical criticism. They certainly knew how to read ancient

bright's leadership certainly included the search for and the defense of a uniform Biblical Truth; cf. 78–98 and *passim*. Cf. also B. O. Long, "Ambitions of Dissent: Biblical Theology in a Postmodern Future," *JR* 76 (1996) 276–289: "For theologians, this meant that despite disclaimers and qualifications, precise descriptions of biblical concepts pointed to essential verities of God visible in and through, but different from, the historical circumstances of biblical writers and even postbiblical scholar-theologians themselves" (276). See also especially his studies in anthropological topics and situations as manifest in Old Testament literature.

documents in their contexts. They proposed new, inspiring hypotheses about the early history of Israel, the formation of the tribes, and the emergence of statehood, on the basis of or in closest contact with ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian history as well as within the horizons of intercultural comparison. Indeed, their historical research opened up new horizons for Old Testament research and related fields of study. Notions of historical change and historical development, of documentary facticity or authenticity, and legendary tradition history were deeply ingrained in these scholars and informed their work, and no small merit is due them for having forged and sharpened the historical and linguistic tools of biblical research. How is it possible that these great scholars, seemingly against their better knowledge, tried to pinpoint areas or aspects of Israelite faith and life that were purportedly exempt from the rules of transitoriness in thinking and theology?

Albrecht Alt, in his famous study *Der Gott der Väter* (1929), presupposed that Israel became a political unit only because of her faith in Yahweh, and tried to look beyond that crucial event of covenant-making into the pre-history of Yahwism.² What he discovered has stimulated the discussion of Israel's religious history ever since. There is, he claimed, a clearly visible pre-stage of that normative faith in Israel's God, namely the religion of the Fathers(!),³ that pertained to the wandering clan-groups of pre-Israelites. Interestingly, Alt's main concern was not with the *different* type of religion he had elaborated, but primarily with the compatibility of clan and tribal religion with subsequent national faith. The God who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in his opinion, by his activity in the realm of personality and history (in contrast to nature-oriented divinities of Canaan) mustered a great affinity in regard to Yahweh, thus preparing the way for the superior and unique God of the Covenant.⁴ Consequently, historians of

² Albrecht Alt, *Der Gott der Väter; ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte der israelitischen Religion* (BWANT 3/12; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1929). Reprinted in idem, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israels* (München: C. H. Beck, 1953) 1.1-78.

³ Feminist exegetes point with good reason to the patriarchal attitude of modern OT scholars who tend to ignore the fact that the Genesis stories of the "fathers" in reality talk about couples who master their lives in unknown and hostile territories, cf. Irmtraud Fischer, *Die Erzeltern Israels: feministisch-theologische Studien zu Genesis 12-36* (BZAW 222, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1994).

⁴ Cf. Albrecht Alt, *Kleine Schriften*, 1.62-63: "If the religion of the Fathers, as we suppose, has been an ancient heritage of Israel's tribes, then we may take it as that sought-for historical model [of Yahwism—Translator] . . . in the sense that it demonstrates in action the same fundamental relationship between God and humans which afterwards—when Yahwism subjugated to itself the whole nation—became dominant. . . . The Gods of the Fathers were the 'educators' [orig. παιδαγωγοί—Translator] preparing the way for the greater God, who later on completely took their place" (63; my translation).

religion recognize developments in time (they cannot help it, since biblical texts give the story), but they are eager to arrive at a definitive stage, when faith-history ceases, giving way to permanent concepts of the one, exclusive deity for all days to come.

This same theological perspective is behind Alt's effort to secure a bit more of the unchanging world. In 1934 he published his essay, still debated today, on "Die Ursprünge des israelitischen Rechts." The main point for our purposes is this: Alt maintains a double rootage of social and ethical norms in the Old Testament, and one would have to dig up the roots of this dichotomy more carefully than has been done in scholarship.⁵ One part of Israel's behavioral orientation simply comes from "Canaanite," i.e. environmental, sources. The so-called "casuistic law" is secular in character and reveals a deep concern for settling social problems by judicial processes in a case-oriented, democratic way. Quite different is what Alt called the "apodictic" law. This "law" is formulated in various ways, predominantly in absolute interdictions: "Thou shalt not . . ." He considered this type of law to be totally unconditioned by any historical factors (that is, immune to and incompatible with its social and cultural context), divine, everlasting, universal (but not according to human determinants).⁶ The well-known quotation is: The apodictic series of norms "do not show the minimum trace of Canaanite origin. . . . Everything in them, on the contrary, is tied to the Israelite people and to their faith in Yahweh."⁷ Considering the work of Albrecht Alt, it is here that his deepest ambition to break away from historical analysis and changing affirmations about God comes to the fore.

In the same vein Martin Noth, author of the epochal *Geschichte Israels* and many other historical and exegetical works, takes into account the

⁵ Is it Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms which inspires the exegete? Notably, there are other theories of origins in regard to biblical law, e.g., Alfred Jepsen, *Untersuchungen zum Bundesbuch* (BWANT 3/41; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1927); Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Bundesbuch: (Ex 20,22–23,33): Studien zu seiner Entstehung und Theologie* (BZAW 188; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1990).

⁶ The very term "apodictic" is alien to legal thinking; it does have its setting in philosophical discourse, denoting an *a priori* state of affairs which may not be questioned; cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "'Apodiktisches' Recht? 'Todes' Recht?" in *Gottes Recht als Lebensraum: Festschrift für Hans Jochen Boecker* (ed. Peter Mommer et al.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993) 7–20; idem, "Life-Preserving Divine Threats in Old Testament Law," *Ex Auditu* 11 (1995) 43–61.

⁷ Albrecht Alt, *Kleine Schriften*, 1.323. Unfortunately, the ideas of propinquity to the people and of relentless, unmitigated criminal law were rampant at the time of growing Nazism in Germany. There was a hot debate going on over judicial law reforms in regard to greater or lesser stringency and individual evaluation of criminal cases, denounced as un-German leniency by right-wing lawyers. Albrecht Alt's designation of "apodictic" law must be seen against this background; cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "'Todes' Recht."

whole breadth of ancient Near Eastern history. He is a great critic of the historical trustworthiness of biblical records. Much-debated was his thesis that, historically speaking, the man Moses could hardly be recovered from texts, molded by tradition, that hand down fanciful tales about their hero and contain very little authentic information. The history of Israel, according to Noth, was a normal history like that of any other people, ancient or modern. Only at certain points does the student of Israelite history encounter phenomena "which are simply incomparable, not because materials for comparative purposes have been lacking so far, but because—according to all we know—such things do not happen at all in the normal history of nations."⁸ Specifically, Noth discovered that the absolute uniqueness of Israel was embedded in her tribal alliance (which still had some remote affinity to Greek city leagues, the so-called "amphictyonies"), the office of a covenant-speaker, the ritual patterns of yearly covenant festivals, and, of course, in the quality of Israelite law, which in itself represented and promoted Yahweh's and Israel's complete and radical exclusiveness.⁹

The younger generation of Old Testament scholars in Germany by and large follows the patterns laid out by the post-war "Fathers" in the field. Werner H. Schmidt in his influential textbook *Alttestamentlicher Glaube in seiner Geschichte* adduces overwhelming evidence for historical, so-to-speak "syncretistic"¹⁰ developments in Israelite conceptions of Yahweh. The God of Israel, through the various phases of social and faith history, integrated within himself characteristics of ancient Near Eastern deities, e.g. El, Baal, Hadad, Mot, and who knows, even Ishtar and Asherah. Schmidt does rely on an almost infinite, absorbent capacity of Israelite theological reflection. But there is a quasi-miraculous dimension to this process of theological development: Deep inside, God stays the same. Accretions and modifications of theological concepts do not touch the very essence of Yahweh and the truth of fundamental formulations of faith, such as "I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides me there is no god" (Isa 45:5). The

⁸ Martin Noth, *Geschichte Israels* (2d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954) 11; my translation.

⁹ Cf. Martin Noth, "Die Gesetze im Pentateuch" (1940), in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (3rd ed.; München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966), esp. 70–81: "The particularity [of Israelite law—Translator] may be subsumed under one heading: that of an exclusive relationship between God and people . . ." (70). All the more astonishing is the fact that Noth supervised and accepted this author's doctoral dissertation, though it was very critical of him (*Wesen und Herkunft des 'apodiktischen' Rechts* [WMANT 20; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965]).

¹⁰ "Syncretism" is still a very bad word in German biblical studies. To hear it being used positively almost made some German theologians leave the lecture hall; this still happened within the last decade of the twentieth century, as I am able to testify.

oneness, sameness, uniqueness, exclusiveness of Israel's God makes him superior to all powers there are and exempt from all historical changes, in spite of seeming incursions or shaping by alien concepts of the divine.¹¹ He argues that the first and second commandments of the Decalogue cannot be derived from Israel's cultural environment. "Exclusiveness of confession to one God does pertain to Israel alone." He further argues that "perhaps faith in a God of the Fathers, who revealed himself alone . . . already constituted a certain model for a unique and aniconic veneration of a deity . . . In any case, the faith of the fathers . . . does full justice to the first commandment. This commandment in essence already determined the relation to God in a period, when it had not yet been known verbatim."¹²

Similarly, Frank Crüsemann pursues the idea of oneness and exclusiveness. He exhaustively unfolds the history of Israelite law, giving due consideration to changing social and historical conditions. The Covenant Code (Exod 20:22–23:33) reflects the conditions of late eighth-century BC Judah after the disappearance of the northern kingdom. Deuteronomy is an offspring of all-too-late efforts on the part of Yahweh-oriented rural nobility (עַם הָאֲרָץ) to steer away from national apostasy (cf. the revolt against Amon, 2 Kgs 21:23), and the Priestly writings clearly go to the emerging communities during and after the exile. A host of valuable details is piled up in the discussion of these law-collections. Crüsemann, a qualified social-historian among biblical exegetes, has his eyes on social and political structures and movements. The wealth of his observations must not obscure, however, that he is seeking the one and unchangeable theological grounds from the beginning of his study. Instead of choosing a diachronic method, advancing from more indefinite beginnings to the final form of Israelite law, the Torah, he inverts historical research, postulating Torah as the ultimate goal, recognizable already at each preliminary stage of law-promulgation. He argues that "the question is Israel's pilgrimage towards Torah."¹³ He adds that "the real issue of Torah is how the exclusive God and Creator of all humankind communicates his singular intentions to one particular people, namely his people of Israel" (10). He starts from the unity of an unchangeable will of that unmistakable "One and the Same God," everlasting, as if the concepts of oneness, sameness, everlastingness

¹¹ Cf. Werner H. Schmidt, "The Characteristics of Faith in Yahweh," §6 in *Alttestamentlicher Glaube in seiner Geschichte* (1st ed. 1968; 6th ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1987) 63–114; Engl. trans. *The Faith of the Old Testament: A History* (trans. John Sturdy; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

¹² Werner H. Schmidt, *Glaube*, 84.

¹³ Frank Crüsemann, *Die Tora: Theologie und Sozialgeschichte des alttestamentlichen Gesetzes* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1992) 7; my translation. For the volume in English, see *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law* (trans. Allan W. Mahnke; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

were not part and parcel of our own transitory existence but fragments of eternity itself.

Rainer Albertz, for his part, follows suite, in line with those who strongly profess to adhere to historical-critical and social-historical orientations. On the surface, in one of his earlier works he even ventured a step further, speaking of different religions within Israel as conditioned by social structures.¹⁴ These different types of faith, oriented, as it were, to the necessities of those social groups (family; village; tribe; nation; diaspora-communities, etc.) do not easily harmonize, but are in tension among themselves. They simply obey different interests, and, by necessity, collide in certain situations, e.g. whenever state and family loyalties are heading in opposing directions. So far, Albertz takes full account of contextuality of theological concepts. All of a sudden, however, Yahweh, the absolute God, appears in his *Religionsgeschichte*. At one time a Southern or Midianite mountain-deity, Yahweh liberates the captive Israelites in Egypt and becomes the exclusive God of the "liberated larger social unit."¹⁵ From this point forward, faith in the exclusive, unique God of Israel becomes the hidden center of all religious history, down to our own days, submerging and surfacing again in the course of events. No longer do we find neutral descriptions of faith, cult, ethics, but only partisan judgments about those who adhere to or reject that God of Liberation. To be sure, according to biblical witnesses Albertz's diagnosis of Israelite/Judean history is quite often negative. State syncretism supersedes true Yahwism, family paganism turns into staunch orthodoxy, capable of saving Yahweh-faith through the bad years of monarchic apostasies. The exilic community is plagued by religious tensions and rifts, and the righteous are often the victims of the godless. In all these tumultuous developments the confession of Yahweh, the sole God and Liberator, remains the absolutely dependable red thread. Unity and oneness, exclusiveness and distinctions are placed against historical diversity and uncertainty.

Dimensions of Contextuality

What are we to learn from such an urgent search for a normative unity in the Scriptures? Obviously, the exegetical maxim "texts should be allowed to speak for themselves," often quoted of the Canon, can hardly make

¹⁴ Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1979). The term he uses is "religionsinterner Pluralismus" (religious plurality within a given society; see also his *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit* [2 vols. in one; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992] 1.43; for the volume in English, see *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament* [trans. John Bowden; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1994]).

¹⁵ Idem, *Religionsgeschichte*, 1.68–104.

these texts responsible to offer, all by themselves, unified concepts or a red thread of meaning, unchangeable and steadfastly immutable through the ups and downs of history. The voices identifiable in the Scriptures are very diverse indeed. They interact with, modify and contradict each other, or they simply stand side by side with quite different outlooks on matters divine and mundane. The Canon as a whole simply does not offer itself as a systematic handbook of theology, much to the distress of modern theologians. On the contrary, as Ernst Käsemann put it many years ago: "The canon cannot be the basis for one unified church but for a plurality of confessions."¹⁶ That means that we should first of all recognize the enormous theological diversity of this marvelous collection of testimonies to our God-talk instead of leveling out these invaluable distinctions (e.g. the many names and functions of God).¹⁷ Unbiased readers of the Bible will quickly recognize the pluriform theological stratification of the Scriptures, while theologians and preachers, concerned—very legitimately so—with the present-day significance of the texts, will tend to condense all that diversity into one absolute affirmation, such as "there is only one God," or "the Supreme Being is eternally the same," or "God is pure Spirit, Love, Peace," etc. Theologically minded readers apparently are not discouraged by the fact that myriads of such statements are being considered the absolute cornerstones of all types of faith. They are not alerted to the problem by all the recognizable failures in the history of dogma to pinpoint absolute truth in very transient wording. They do not feel hampered or ashamed by their own limitations. They really and seriously believe in the unlikely possibility of expressing in limited human words what the unchanging reality could be like (oneness; sameness; eternity, etc.), disregarding the plain fact that we, as beings subject to time and space, do not have adequate means of knowing the absolute.¹⁸ More precisely, they actually hold that such oneness and sameness is scientifically demonstrable within texts, historical events, and formulated ideas.

¹⁶ Freely adapted from Ernst Käsemann's essay, "Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?" in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) 214–223, esp. 221: "The New Testament canon [because of its variable kerygmas, differing theological positions transcending the boundaries of the New Testament, and their at least partial incompatibility—Translator's addition from the preceding phrases] as it presents itself to the historian is the foundation for the plurality of confessional churches."

¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann is, to my knowledge, the first to really acknowledge the diversity of witnesses in the Hebrew Canon; see his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

¹⁸ There are a good number of Old Testament scholars who seem to pursue a more "neutral" and "objective" scientific path, looking soberly at the panoply of biblical theologies; cf. e.g. Niels Peter Lemche, "Kann von einer 'israelitischen Reli-

But, on the other hand, we have excellent reasons, even obligations, for trying to find firm orientations in this transient world. Everyone of us badly wants to stand on reliable ground when making decisions as to how to arrange our lives. There are too many opinions, creeds, and claims in the world; they all cannot possibly be correct and legitimate. Do we need, however, comprehensive, absolute bases, verifiable in a past which we are unable to reconstruct, anyway? Are universal affirmations about God the only legitimate answer to our need for certitude? Or is our desire for an ultimate anchorage of our selves in the one and everlasting God evidence of human insanity, preposterous self-delusion and exaggeration? The underlying motives for aspiring to the absolute may come out, unwillingly, whenever we formulate "absolute" truths about God in an exclusive way. Some people in ancient Israel appear to have fallen into this theological trap already, when describing the supreme, universal deity as being dedicated exclusively to one particular group, namely one's own. Christians all through their history have eagerly adopted this kind of thinking, refusing, as it were, access to God to everybody outside their own little sphere of interest. Naturally, this kind of insistence on having special and unique claims to be close to the Absolute, denouncing all other aspirants as non-elect and traitors, does produce strife and, in the long run, intransigence, hatred, and fanaticism, starting in Genesis 4 (Cain and Abel) and continuing through all so-called "holy" wars into the fanatic conflicts of our present days.

Still, we should ask what the legitimate shape of our search for certainty could be like. Acknowledging our own existence and thinking to be conditioned by time, space, history, culture, and all the opportunities and limitations established within this temporality, we should simply refrain from seeking ultimate, unchanging theological affirmations outside of our own time, society, and global conditioning. Inside our own times and experiences, however, and in dialogue with witnesses from the past, we need to look for the elusive presence of God. Our "Archimedean" point is hidden in present-day challenges and truths, and we can approach it only by intensive, ecumenical discussion. We can no longer afford "eternal" truisms, neither in politics nor in theology, because all alleged absolute truths have proven to be contextually conditioned and far from eternal. Within our own limited sphere of experience we should enter into debate for the right answers to burning questions, admitting different solutions by contempo-

gion' noch weiterhin die Rede sein?" in *Ein Gott allein?: JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte* (ed. Walter Dietrich and Martin A. Klopfenstein; Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994) 59–75.

rary people, groups, and religions. Plurality is the issue of our time, pluralism which has to procure survival of humankind. Absolutisms of any sort are detrimental for our present-day situation. The quest for the right definition of the one and exclusive God has to be abandoned, for the sake of the survival of this planet. But, within the limits of our time and space and within the limits of our small, globalized world, we must nevertheless look for valid orientation. This orientation cannot be expected to come from absolutist systems, be they political and economic, or spiritual and religious. Most urgent, for the occidental, Christian world, is recognition of its own limitations, precluding all kinds of hegemonies in this world. To construe a "One God-One World" pattern in pursuance of one's own desire for world domination is, frankly, anachronistic. All these constructions of past history, outmoded as they are, cannot be supported by historical facts. History as such is always pluriform and ambivalent, a *post-festum* construction, never a factual datum. It never simply is "there," but has to be imagined and built up from the viewer's vantage point. We should frankly admit, therefore, the hypothetical nature also of our affirmations about God. By necessity they are relative to absolute truth. And they remain relative, no matter how much eternal silicon we may pump into them.

Plural Theologies

What, then, really are "contextual theologies" in the Scriptures and in our times? We noted already, that the large collection of biblical texts does not lend itself to doctrinal systematization. Redactional processes in all parts of the canon, harmonizing as they were, never did smooth out the discrepancies of group-oriented and history-bound theological thinking. From our present vantage point of an occidental, pluralistic society we realize that biblical witnesses were indeed tied up in quite different modes of existence and thinking. Socially, we can easily determine ancient family and clan structures, village, town, and tribal organizations, parochial and diaspora setups, and all of these social groupings may have subdivisions and special modifications of standard models. The customs and norms reigning in each of these associations visibly influenced theological conceptualizations on their respective levels.¹⁹ Thus, family and clan concerns and face-to-face life in more or less stable interrelationships is reflected in intimate, personal experiences with a family deity.²⁰ Clan, village, and city ex-

¹⁹ Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Gott in unserer Zeit," *Die Zeichen der Zeit* 52 (1998) 2–8.

²⁰ Cf. idem, *Yahweh, the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology* (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Changes in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1996).

periences are characterized by lessening solidarity bonds and growing communal challenges. Therefore, the God of these widening, social organizations takes on qualities of common welfare and rule of law and order, and is seen as a provider of a more general welfare and protection. State religion, at least in monarchic times, becomes more authoritarian, centering on dynasty, royal administration, and firmly institutionalized temple service (controlled by the king), and fostering nationalistic overtones in theology. After the breakdown of the Judean monarchy in 597 BC, a full reconstruction of social and religious identity took place among the Israelites residing in Palestine or in the lands of their sojourn. The new and unheard-of situation challenged the community of Yahweh to rally around religious rites, traditions and values, to adopt a new identity as a purely religious congregation (as far as we know, a first confessional entity), and—in order to secure survival as an ethnic or semi-ethnic group—to practice seclusion from the surrounding nations. The uniqueness and exclusiveness of Yahweh was a necessary corollary to living conditions in an alien empire. To attribute to Israel's God supreme authority over all the rest of divine beings, to make him the sole Creator of heaven and earth and the only one to be able to right that confused and power-stricken world, was the astonishing reaction of Judeans to defeat, humiliation, deportation, and that arrogance of power so well attested in many national configurations. Yahweh became—he had not always been that way—the only and exclusive God for Israel under the pressures of foreign domination.

It would be too tiring and time-consuming to go into the details of Israel's pluralistic society that endured for more than six centuries in her ancient homeland. Suffice it to say that the theological study of social and cultural layers in the biblical period has barely begun. The influence of those times and cultures on images of Yahweh has certainly been underestimated so far. When interpreting the texts of the Bible we have to be aware of the specific contextual conditions under which they took shape and have been transmitted. No absolute affirmations about God or world are to be expected. Each single passage, beautiful and convincing as it may seem, has to be evaluated on the basis of its social and historical horizon. This is one distinct step of exegesis (Latin American interpreters teach us that it is not necessarily the first one), and must be complemented by a thorough analysis of our own time, social structures, prejudices and expectations. Knowing full well that neither ancient nor modern contexts may stand for the eternal, absolute state of affairs, a dialogue between witnesses of old and preachers of today, looking for reliable orientation within a turbulent world, must begin. Our goal must be to achieve truth and justice, as they are imperative now, in responsibility to God, in our restricted spheres of

experience, i.e. in those contemporary networks of human existence in which we participate.

Such spheres of life and responsibility did vary over time, although some anthropological constants are readily discernible in the history of humankind. Changing social structures over the centuries include, most of all, the shape, size, and function of families in the larger societal organizations; the legitimations of statehood (change from monarchic to democratic constitutions); the rise of individualistic ideologies unheard of in antiquity; and the globalization of economies around the world on the basis of modern technical revolutions. Our world has grown immensely in comparison to biblical conceptions, and at the same time it has shrunk to atomistic individual existences and incredibly reduced geographic dimensions. In no way can we claim to speak for the whole universe, because our infinitely tiny planet may be just one among hundreds of millions of like celestial bodies carrying life or semblances of life. Do we really need to make cosmic affirmations about God in order to achieve certainty in our lives? Can we afford to do so? We cannot, I am sure. Our spatial limitations are obvious, and universal theological discourse can be speculative at best.

What might our theology be like, after all? It has to move to find answers for our lives and our survival, ranging from the individual and his or her rather autistic world to that global conglomeration of billions of people today constituting one coherent and conflicting mass of beings under a common destiny. The globalized economy and society requires solutions for survival perhaps more urgently than the many forlorn individuals searching for subsistence and happiness. An ecumenical theology is universal in its limitations to the present, limited world. Individual theology has to take account of all the individuals in existence. This, too, is a universal aspect, limited by present-day circumstances and outlooks. Theology in either realm occurs in that transitory space available to us. It ventures affirmations in regard to God, the ground of being, and the final destination, seeking to relate to the whole and unknown in which we find ourselves embedded. But theology, while being done in our time and space, cannot yet move out of the boundaries, and cannot march into transcendence to put up habitation there. Quite often it is exactly this that theologians pretend to do, however. Both Plato and Kant, and many other wise people, warned against human presumption in claiming to know ultimate reality.

Contextual theologies in the Bible and today, in consequence, refrain from making absolute statements on the basis of historical events, transmitted ideas, canonized texts. They take fully into account the "absolute" limitation of all human discourse, and the "absolute" certainty that everything on earth is subject to change, even concepts of the divine. Within

their temporal and spatial restriction, however, contextual theologians seek truth and orientation for their respective environment and—together with an ecumenical fellowship—global ways of cooperation and survival. Justice, peace, and the preservation of creation are paramount objectives in this contextual strategy under the eyes of an “eternal” God, who, according to biblical witnesses, ever so often battled for the sake of oppressed, discriminated-against, and forlorn people.