

# THEOLOGIES IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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## POINTS OF DEPARTURE

How can Biblical Theology, the very goal of our work, be approached? In this purview focusing on the Psalter as a prime example for theological reasoning in liturgical contexts I am departing from several assumptions.

One simply says, that God-talk or theology can hardly be uniform, universal, and valid through the ages. Rather, God-talk, for deeply divine and human reasons, for the very heart of faith must be contextual, temporary, unfinished and in a certain concordance with changing customs, cultures, social conditions.<sup>1</sup> Our theological discourse must not be taken as eternal truth. We think and talk as transitory beings, firmly tied to the textures of our socialization and cultural identities.

Secondly, since there are great varieties of cultural and social patterns — in coexistence as well as in conflict with each other — we certainly have to count on quite different modes of talking about God, with different experiences and conceptualizations of the Divine. Living side by side, nowadays, with many other godfearing or godignoring people, intensely feeling the challenges of our pluralistic societies, we have the unique opportunity to test our own theological affirmations and learn of their richness and deficiencies, and their precious, human relativity — that is, affinity — to our own cultural settings.

What rarely has been recognized, however, is that pluralism (to a certain degree this always has been the case) has invaded even the stronghold of individual being. Each of us lives at the same time in very different social contexts. We are on the one hand members of small, intimate groups of family and friends, and on the other of various economic, political and religious associations. In both kinds

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologien im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001); English transl., *Theologies in the Old Testament* (London: T. & T. Clark; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress); idem, and Ulrich Schoenborn (eds.), *Hermeneutik-sozialgeschichtlich* (exuz 1, Münster: LIT-Verlag, 1999).

of social conglomeration we play our roles according to different tunes. Personal experience may tell us that theological concepts and argumentations are distinctly different in either context. God is perceived on the one hand in terms of personal relations, in I-Thou terms, and on the other as an ordering power with increasingly superpersonal authority. God, the companion who exercises solidarity with his (or her) people, cannot easily be reconciled with that divine being who speaks through thunderstorms, smites the enemies, and administers justice to all mankind.

The Psalter is a uniquely opportune work to test out the manifold and multilayered theological discourse I have tried to suggest above. Most biblical "books" do have some cohesion, plot, or structure. The "book of Psalms," however, seems to be a much more loosely-knit compilation of liturgical texts, used for different kinds of interactions, rites, ceremonies, gatherings.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the broad confluence of texts from greatly different sources in the Psalter provides a very colorful picture of human conditions and longings. This makes the biblical Psalms an unmatched treasure of diverse theological concepts.

### LIFE-SETTINGS

The early masters of formcritical analysis, Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel,<sup>3</sup> emphasized social and communicative settings in establishing their genre-classifications of the psalms. They traced complaints, hymns, royal songs, and wisdom poems back to determined groups of people interacting with each other and with their God, at different "recurring" opportunities. Although large differences exist among form-critics, in detailed evaluations the basic human associations producing and using those principal genres emerge clearly enough in socio-historical and formcritical research.<sup>4</sup> We may identify four main types of human association, not precluding

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<sup>2</sup>Naturally, not all experts will agree at this point. Many defend a well-thought out organization of the material at hand. But there is a good deal of consensus as to the various fountain-heads of individual psalms and genres.

<sup>3</sup>Their classical studies are: Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *An Introduction to the Psalms* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998); Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (2 vols., Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

<sup>4</sup>Overviews of research offer, e.g. Martin J. Buss, *Form-Criticism*; Henning Graf Reventlow, *Gebet*; Hans-Peter Müller, "Formgeschichte/Formenkritik I," *TRE* 11.271 - 285.

sub-divisions and overlappings, with each of these basic social conditions producing its proper psalm types.

- (1) The first type is the small intimate family cluster, the age-old economic and religious nucleus of humankind, resorted to cultic means, whenever one member fell seriously ill or was threatened by demonic powers. Petitionary rituals were held, often on the precincts of the patient's home, as may be learnt from hundreds of Akkadian (Assyrian-Babylonian) incantations. A ritual expert would lead the ceremony and let the endangered person recite the decisive prayer of complaint, confession, and petition.<sup>5</sup> This pattern of ceremonial healing is common in most tribal societies to this very day. Even modern religions maintain some of those archaic proceedings; for example, prayer-services for the sick, last unctions, exorcisms, and secularized remnants may be discovered even in today's medical and psychotherapeutic practices. Exuberant thanksgivings after graces attained and fortunes restored were the counterpart of complaint and petition, also being celebrated among intimate circles of family and neighbours. Offerings to God, opulent meals, testimony of the saved one and merriment were characteristic elements of this "private" festivity.
- (2) A second layer of religious or cultic action without doubt was the regional aggregation of families in village or township with their own local sanctuary. The Old Testament quite often refers to the *bamah*, the open-air shrine, of a neighbourhood, whose existence archaeology has amply confirmed in many Israelite sites. People were united by common interests principally according to the seasonal calendar, with respect to personal *rites de passage*, and in spontaneous cases of common grief and joy. Early victory songs may pertain to this category, led by inspired women (cf. Exod 15:21). The noisy crowd would join in shouting refrains, as cheerleaders intoned the lines: "Yahweh is good," "His loyalty endures forever" (Ps 136:1-26). Appealing to and hailing the God of weather and fertility, protection and victory was the main end of such cults of local and regional dimension. Countless religious activities survive even today in burroughs, clubs, rural centers, *et cet-*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Der bittende Mensch* (WMANT 51; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1980).

*era*, destined to support the communitarian life of people not related by blood but tied together by vital interests on a smaller scale, on a person-to-person basis.

- (3) Gradually, with growth and diversification of society, cultic activity passes into the larger ambit of tribal and national concerns. Anonymity grows with the sheer number of persons involved in cultic interactions or assemblies. Rules of communication — as well as common interests — change considerably, and with such changes theological concepts also fall into different patterns, gaining a new profile. To complicate matters, state cults in the Ancient Near East are dynasty-centered, managed by professionals, and, as a rule, do discourage popular responsibility. With the establishment of divine or semi-divine monarchies (a switch that causes much concern in Judges 9 and 1 Samuel 7-12), state cults become restricted to officially-appointed royal priesthoods. Since the hymnic material of the Davidic court (if anything from that source has survived at all) was used and remodelled by the exilic/post-exilic community (cf. Psalms 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 132; 144) also in terms of messianic expectations (cf. Pss 2; 110), we cannot be sure how much authentic material of the pre-exilic state-cult has been preserved. In any case, the "highest" level of Old-Israelite social organization falls into line with bureaucratic and autocratic forms of government, which reduced the anonymous mass of citizens to a subservient state, while permitting freely, as it were, all kinds of family, local and regional cults on their respective social levels and with their specific theological interests. In addition, Ancient Near Eastern monarchies always purported to truly serve — in the name of highest deities — the needs of the weakest elements of society (cf. Psalm 72 and Hammurapi's prologue to his law-edicts).
- (4) After Israel's final defeat of 587 BC and the loss of monarchic structures, a complete reorganization of the people of Yahweh was inevitable. National ambitions could only survive underground. Local communities, apparently, soon rallied around old family- and tribal-traditions. In retrospect, monarchy, temple, and prophecy all became unifying factors for a new Israel, which identified herself with *tora*, sabbath, circumcision, temple, and the holy land as the people elected by Yahweh, creator of heaven and earth and supreme king over all nations.

This new, unheard of community of faith,<sup>6</sup> without state government, was the decisive social group shaping the sacred traditions and handing them down to the Jewish, Christian, and even Muslim communities. Exclusive adoration of Yahweh — much later erroneously designated as "monotheism"— is the hallmark of this religious body of local congregations. In many ways the Book of Psalms carries the stamp of this latest period in Old Testament history.<sup>7</sup> As far as contemporary songs and prayers are concerned, we should consider the so-called "wisdom" poems as products of that early Jewish community. The main spiritual need of the congregation was for divine guidance in a pluriform religious environment and under foreign domination. *Tora-psalms* such as 1, 19, and 119 occupy important positions in the Psalter. Reflections about life, death and the ups and downs of faith (cf. Psalms 9/10; 23; 37; 39; 49; 73; 90; 139) in the midst of internal strife about true righteousness and fidelity are typical for the latest layer in Old Testament psalmody. Theological wrestling with historical developments leading to a loss of national and religious independence (cf. Psalms 44; 89; 106; 137) are sure signs of the communities' state of mind in those crucial 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Of course, the community of faith was not a homogeneous social block. Different liturgical needs of varying groups persisted, such as attendance to the sick, ostracism of pilgrims on their way to distant Jerusalem, members of congregation stricken by poverty, or priestly groups particularly attached to a Zionist theology. These groups maintained specific songs and liturgies, as still extant in the Psalter.

In summary, the different genres of psalms reflect specific social and cultic groupings, consisting always of real flesh and blood people, in Israel's long history of faith. The trajectory of psalmodic expressions runs from small-group, domestic services to regional as-

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<sup>6</sup> Possibly, the followers of Zoroaster in ancient Persia, had earlier formed communities of faith transcending family ties. See Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* (2 vols., Leiden: Brill 1980, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> While working on a form-critical commentary (*Psalms* [2 vols., FOTL 14 and 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988 and 2001]), I became more and more convinced that much reworking of older Psalms is evident in the canonical text: e.g. in meditative, homiletical, and late hymnic genres.

semblies and royal state rituals back to parochial community worship related to our Christian Sunday-morning gatherings. Moreover, to remind us of our presuppositions, these modes of religious expression were and are tied to determined social bodies which do not simply form a historical chain or sequence, but may exist contemporaneously, side by side, at any given time. Many of the theological problems and blessings connected with the Book of Psalms have their origin in this fundamental, at least four-part social setup experienced by the early Jewish fathers and mothers: In sociological terms we are dealing with psalm theology coming out of (a) family and clan milieu; (b) regional neighborhoods; (c) royal state cults; and (d) the newly-founded religious community of faith, representing a quite new kind of communal organization somewhere between FAMILY- and state-structures and conceptions.<sup>8</sup>

The exilic-postexilic community of faith thus left us with its powerful heritage of spiritual and theological patterns of contemporary social mouldings, together with its own complexities and confusions. We should now enquire after the specific religious experiences and conceptualizations of the Divine, that is, for the contextual theologies on each level of social organization. For practical purposes I am drawing together stages (a) and (b), since they are close to each other in featuring organic face-to-face relationships between members.

#### PERSONAL GOD, FAMILY, AND NEIGHBORHOOD RELIGION

For millennia, before taking the step towards sedentary life and organized communities of a larger scope, humankind existed in isolated bands structured according to kinship lines. Even the Israelites, latecomers in the Near Eastern theatre, visualized a prehistoric stage occupied by patriarchal and sometimes perhaps matriarchal families with their specific customs and beliefs. Modern research from Albrecht Alt to Karel van der Toorn and Leo G. Perdue, etc., acknowledges this particular religious setting which does bring forth a distinct mode of theological conceptualization. It is interesting to note that researchers in modern small-group sociology tend to confirm the existence of a specific kind of religious faith within primary social clusters. This means that the original structuring of faith has not been lost over the ages. And the Psalms, having one of their an-

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Conflicting Theologies in the Old Testament," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 22 (2000) 120-34.



cient roots in family environment, can give us a vivid impression of how family-religion has come about and is still in operation.

The principal deity of the family, primarily aligned to the male or female (in my opinion, more to the latter! House-cults of old were probably administered by chief women)<sup>9</sup> leader of the small unit, was more or less considered a member of the group, even if a prominent or supreme one. Affinities with ancestor worship probably existed.<sup>10</sup> The "God of my father" (although not attested, we should expect also "of my mother"!) becomes the deity of every member of the group, a helper and saviour in daily troubles from birth to grave. God — committed to a particular group — was (and still is!) a defender of his or her client's interest (cf. Jacob's conditional vow to serve the deity he finds at Bethel, Gen 28:20-21). From this very intimate relationship between God and small group arise dimension and atmosphere of family faith down to our own days:

It was you who took me from the womb;  
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.  
On you I was cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.  
(Ps 22:9-10 NRSV [MT v. 10-11])

O God, from my youth you have taught me,  
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.  
So even to old age and gray hairs,  
O God, do not forsake me,  
until I proclaim your might  
to all the generations to come. (Ps 71:17-18a, NRSV)

Personal faith is embedded in family-relationships, the most horrible experience being abandonment by close kinsfolk and becoming the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 55-66.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Josef Tropper, *Nekromantie* (AOAT 223; Kevelaer: Butzon & Becker; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1989); Oswald Loretz, "Die Teraphim als 'Ahnen-Götter-Figur(in)en'," *UF24* (1993) 133-78; idem, "Nekromantie und Totenevokation in Mesopotamien, Ugarit und Israel." in B. Janowski, K. Koch & G. Wilhelm (eds.), *Religionsgeschichtliche Beziehungen zwischen Kleinasien, Nord-syrien und dem Alten Testament. Internationales Symposion Hamburg 17.-21. März 1990* (OBO 129; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) 285-315.



object of naked aggression on their part (cf. Pss 27:10; 41:5-9 [MT vv. 6-10]; 88:8, 18 [MT 9:19]).<sup>11</sup>

God is experienced totally in personal categories, not as an abstract power. The I-Thou relationship, so influential and precious in our whole religious heritage, has grown out of ancient family faith. Some of the highest values of Jewish-Christian theology — childlike trust in God, personalized hope for divine solidarity and help, courage to argue with the divine protector, expectation that he or she may heal aberrations, broken relationships, illnesses, social disruptions — all these familiar features of personal faith do have their beginnings with family religion. Faith is grounded in belongingness, and belongingness generates the deepest kind of trust. Therefore, formulas of "kinship" and expressions of confidence abound in individual psalms of complaint or thanksgiving.<sup>12</sup> "You are [he is] my God (helper, shield, shepherd, castle; rock, refuge, etc.)" is a very concise statement of this basic relationship of trust (for example, Ps 22:10[MT v. 11]; 31:14[MT v. 15]; 63:1[MT v. 2]; 118:28; 140:6 [MT v. 7]; 7:10[MT v. 11]; 54:4[MT v. 6]; 71:3, etc.). Some psalms may be classified as "songs of confidence," because trust is their dominant mood (cf. Psalms 4; 11; 16; 23; 27; 56; 62; 131).

The vocabulary in the Psalter expressing confidence in and nearness to God is large, and the form-element, as already indicated, propels prayer to the personal, familiar God. Interestingly, these individual petitions and thanksgivings do not need the notions of exodus, covenant, torah, king, or Zion. They are more directly related to the deity, being independent of secondary institutions. God belongs to their social group. God is dwelling in the midst of the faithful. We may again refer to domestic cults in Israel, clearly attested in Gen 31:34; Exod 21:6; Judg 17:1-5; 1 Sam 19:13, 16. The "household idols" actually were personal, familial deities represented by figurines. Perhaps they were identical with those clay models found by the hundreds in Israelite homes of monarchic times, for the most

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<sup>11</sup> For all psalm-expositions in this essay cf. also "Introduction to Cultic Poetry" and interpretations of individual texts by Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms* (FOTL 14 and 15).

<sup>12</sup> The motif or form-element expressing confidence in God is an essential item in individual complaints; see Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms* (FOTL 14 and 15), glossaries under "Affirmation of Confidence"; Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 127-30.

part of nude female deities.<sup>13</sup> We need not, in my opinion, shun away from this testimony to "alien" Gods in Israel. On the contrary: If the above line of argumentation is at all sustainable, we find household religion an incredible enrichment of theological experience within the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Encountering the divine on the lowest social level, experiencing inclusively the female side of the deity, is basic for faith and theological insight. We should be grateful for the width and depth of biblical tradition. The Yahweh-alone theology is to be understood inclusively, not exclusively: God offers contacts and revelations on all levels of human social organization, in each and every cultural sphere, for all kinds of people.

The point just made is underlined by another piece of evidence. A host of personal names in the Hebrew Scriptures testifies most clearly to the prevalence of well-defined family-outlooks on life, kinship, blessing, salvation from evils, etc.,<sup>15</sup> to the exclusion of national religious concerns. In personal names,

individual relationships to God are put on the same foundation as in individual complaints and salvation oracles: they do imply an archaic, creational state of affairs.<sup>16</sup>

God assists the mother to give birth (cf. *Jiftah*, "[God] opened [the womb]"; *Elnatan*, "God gave [a child]"; *Amminadab*, "my uncle [= God] promotes [birth?]," sustains and saves the child,<sup>17</sup> and indeed is

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Urs Winter, *Frau und Göttin* (OBO 53, Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder* (OBO 74; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Like many other exegetes Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 181-82, 218-25, 373-79, judges that state religion eventually supersedes family faith. In my opinion, family experiences of God never have ceded to any superior influences, but maintained their autonomy into our own times.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1978) 49-77. Albertz points out that: (a) personal names in the Old Testament are all but lacking references to "national" creeds in Yahweh's salvific deeds; and (b) these names rather refer to familial experiences of divine benevolence, sustenance and help in regard to birth, illness, threats, dangers, upkeep, blessing, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> Albertz lists 58 names attributing to the personal deity all sorts of care, protection, help, salvation, vindication etc. (*Persönliche Frömmigkeit*, 61-65).

his or her "Father" (*Abihu*, "my father is he").

A trustful relationship of individuals to their gods antedates their existence; it is anchored in being created by the deity. Trust is not initiated by a human decision .... Personal ties to God are in a way unalienable, just like the relationship between parents and children normally is not liable ever to be cancelled.<sup>18</sup>

We may conclude, therefore, that familial faith has been thoroughly routed, as far as the psalmic literature of Israel and her neighbours is concerned, in the ambit of small-group structures and outlooks. The psalmists, at this level, are taking over the role the deity's children: "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast" (Ps 131:2).

From this infant's perspective there is a thread to expressions of confidence even in the majestic deity portrayed in many psalms: "hide me under the shadows of thy wings" (Ps 17:8; cf. similar expressions in Pss 36:8; 57:2; 63:8; 91:4), if "wings"<sup>19</sup> really is referring to the guardians of the ark and not — as in the famous Jesus saying — the protection of a roosting hen (Mt 23,37). Language of confidence has also been drawn from the imagery of war and protection, that is, from the realm of larger social structures (God is "my king," "my shield," "my castle," etc.). For millennia families lived within widespread organizations and experienced the pressures and opportunities of such more ample and anonymous contexts. They were certainly familiarized with the language and metaphors of a wider society. But apparently the real roots of personal trust are age-old experiences: to be sheltered within the intimate kinship group and the neighborhood in village and small townships, which partially function on kinship ties. In distinction to mere family bounds, ancient neighborhoods as a rule operated according to common interests in agricultural and seasonal tasks, defence against hostile outsiders, and internal peace-keeping. Anthropological insights help us to differentiate between family and village life. The latter have to build on custom and law that already exists, while families live on the solidarity of "natural" kinsfolk. In consequence, faith and theology in a village community, although partly prolonging family-attitudes towards the larger group, reach out for a God who is less tied to micro-groups but rather deals with seasonal and political affairs. This

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<sup>18</sup> *Albertz, Persönliche Frömmigkeit*, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. W. Dommershausen, *kanap*, *ThWAT* 4.243-46.

local deity was venerated in early Israel at open-air sanctuaries. The challenge originating from community religion clearly was for all participants to overcome self-centered family interests.<sup>20</sup>

From this perspective it seems fully clear, then, that the material and spiritual interests articulated in expressions of confidence and belongingness are those of the familial group. This means that faith and theology revolve around basic needs of life, health, survival of the individual, and his or her immediate surroundings. Accordingly, God is provider of food, housing, and group-harmony (Psalm 133), midwife of the newly born (Ps 22:10), protector against fire and water, disease and bad luck (Ps 91:2-6), healer of all illnesses (Psalm 38), and protector against demonic onslaught (Psalm 91). Naturally, the personal and familial God takes sides in group conflicts in favour of his adherents. Thus, some of the frequent references to "enemies and evildoers" in the Book of Psalms certainly pertain to the inner circle of familial piety, especially in those prayers which show strictly personal, individual traits of suffering, persecution and defence (e.g. Psalms 22; 38; 55), as well as of revenge (Ps 109). On the other hand, the God of the rural community has to take care of weather and soil, herds and plantations, inter-familial relations and customs, evil-minded neighbors, and seasonal feasts (cf. Psalms 8, 12, 65, 118, etc.).

One of the most spectacular features of familial theology has always been noted with a certain surprise by those modern Christian theologians who believe the Almighty must be a sovereign of sorts, ruling all the world and therefore not suffering any obstacles to his or her rule. Family religion of old, however, did not visualize God in terms of national or world dominion, nor does a modern family faith do so. That means that familial deities — belonging to the small group and facing competition from other small-group divinities — were accessible for argument and rebuke. Individual complaints in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East (much like in tribal societies around the world) have been vehicles of serious censure and violent complaints against God, which is only possible on the basis of that intimate familial relationship. Wherever we meet similar characteristics in communal laments (cf. "city-laments," or "communal complaints" as in Lamentations and Psalms 44 and 89) we need to

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<sup>20</sup> For more on village and small-town religion, see in Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologien im Alten Testament*, chap. 5.

identify the life-settings and consider the possibility that familial forms have been used in a congregational or national service. Originally, direct and aggressive language against God from his own followers most likely arose in the religious family tradition of the kinship-God.

My contention, all in all, is simply this: Kinship theology, both at home in familial groups and to some extent in village communities — realized primarily in house-cults (mostly under direction of women?) and familial pilgrimages to regional shrines as that of Elkanah, Hanna, and Peninna (1 Samuel 1) — is primeval and the primary theology of all mankind. The faith of the small kinship group forms the basis for all subsequent theological systems, and still is most essential for human existence. It persists into our own time as a distinct type of religious faith. After all, where else than in small groups face-to-face with co-religionists could we exercise our faiths and become human beings? The hallmarks of family religion are intimacy, inter-personal-relations, limitations to individual lives and necessities, and struggle for wholesome solidarity, both human and divine. Correspondingly, the features of God in kinship theologies should lack tyrannical, arbitrary, majestic traits, since his or her face is human:

Yahweh is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.<sup>21</sup>  
He will not always accuse,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.  
He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
For as heavens are high above the earth  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far he removes our transgressions from us.  
As a father has compassion for his children,  
so Yahweh has compassion for those who fear him. (Ps 103:8-13)

Psalm 103 is in my opinion a "communal hymn" that shows typical concerns of a congregation in a tradition-minded and universalistic setting. Nevertheless, the individual member of the group is voicing his or her eulogies to Yahweh, probably in common worship. And

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<sup>21</sup> The concept of *hesed* ("steadfast love," better: "solidarity") is central to the family and kinship ethos. Cf. Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994) 64-67, 81-94.

the portrayal of the fatherly deity taking care of all believers has certainly been derived from family experiences and traditions.

#### FAITH IN SOCIETY AT LARGE

All other kinds of social organizations apart from family and kinship-groups emerged fairly late in cultural or civil development.<sup>22</sup> We may distinguish several of such "secondary" or "tertiary" societal arrangements in antiquity and modernity: the tribe, state, ethnic entity, political and trade associations, professional societies, religious and gender alliances, etc. In the present context, however, we are interested only in one common feature: larger associations very soon tend to become anonymous entities in which the individual does function differently from his or her own family environment. In other words, larger and anonymous groupings develop their own set of rules, no longer based on kinship values (no matter how insistently the participants clamour for "brotherhood" and "sisterhood"), but now governed by more "objective," impersonal norms and perspectives. In fact, emergent "law," with its offshoots in village customs, is one prominent indicator of a society's growing anonymity. "Bureaucracy" and "loss of solidarity" are others. As far as "law" is concerned, strict impartiality must prevail in the name of justice, while family solidarity, in contrast, is built on individual and group needs. (To "consider the person" is against the law! Compare Exod 23:3; Deut 1:17; 16:19, but this is necessary within the family ethos).

The Psalter also reflects the secondary level of socialization, consisting, as it were, not only of prayers of the small-group type. A good number of texts have their origin in ceremonies or rituals oriented towards military and political organizations of Israel and/or Judah. In modern research these are often named "collective" or "national" psalms, serving distinct opportunities in the life of the nation. Conspicuous are situations of complaint (cf. Psalms 44; 89), thanksgiving (cf. Psalm 124), victory (cf. Psalm 68), hymnic praise (cf. Psalms 105; 136; 148), public education (cf. Psalm 78), and national mourning and penitence (cf. Psalm 106; Nehemiah 9). All these texts were no doubt adapted, used, and reused among the exilic and postexilic communities, thus serving the ends of a group of worshippers that was markedly different from either family or state or-

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Darcy Ribeiro, *O processo civilizatório* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., Petrópolis, Brazil: Editora Vozes, 1979).

ganization.<sup>23</sup> But sociologically speaking, these texts also preserve sufficient traces of that anonymous larger body of people that outgrew the limits of kinship structures.

Would anyone doubt that in larger associations, with their different ways of life, a different type of faith and theology needs to emerge? In other words, the concepts of God (by necessity?) have to be different, when they emerge from so disparate a social setting as anonymous organizations. The main characteristics of theological models are:

- God assumes hierarchical leadership, which is mirrored in monarchic structures.
- The city, state, or ethnic group, with its peculiar organization and interests, also becomes the matrix of theological thinking.
- The state economy and contemporary ideas about property, commerce, and political associations play a significant role.

One prominent realm — attributed by some scholars along the lines of J. Wellhausen as the decisive influence on Old Testament theological thought— is the "military camp," where war-rituals were celebrated and where Yahweh was envisioned as the Lord of battle. The image of God was one of a terrifying hero, wielding superhuman powers in favour of his followers and against their enemies:

Then the earth reeled and rocked;  
the foundation of the mountains trembled  
and quaked, because he was angry.  
Smoke went up from his nostrils,  
and devouring fire from his mouth;  
glowing coals flamed forth from him.  
He bowed the heavens, and came down;  
thick darkness was under his feet.  
He rode on the cherub, and flew;  
he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.  
He made darkness his covering around him,  
his canopy thick clouds dark with water.  
Out of the brightness before him  
there broke through his clouds,  
hailstones and coals of fire.

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<sup>23</sup> See the following section, THE ONLY GOD OF THE EXCLUSIVE CONGREGATION.

Yahweh also thundered in the heavens,  
and the Most High uttered his voice.  
And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them;  
he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.  
Then the channels of the sea were seen,  
and the foundations of the world were laid bare  
at your rebuke, O Yahweh,  
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.  
(NRSV Ps 18:7-15; MT vv. 8-16)

The "theophany report" occurs frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Pss 68:7-10[MT vv. 8-11]; 77:16-19[MT vv. 17-20]; 97:2-5; Hab 3:3-15, etc.).<sup>24</sup> The inherent concept of God here has nothing to do with mercy and care, or the individual's well-being and daily concerns. It is instead oriented towards the crises of a threatened larger entity, a political body of sorts, which has to fight back in order to survive. Unconditional confrontation — war until the enemy's annihilation — is the order of the day. God is consequently pictured as warrior,<sup>25</sup> with his anger (more literally, his "nostrils") raging, and nature reeling with anxiety. God's armament is superior, and nobody can resist his fierce onslaught.<sup>26</sup> Thus he intervenes in favour of Israel, saving his clients from extreme dangers. Should this frightening picture of Yahweh really be fundamental to Israel's faith? We must at least admit that a deity like the warrior-god did play an important role in certain contexts of biblical times.

There are other models of God that belong to different situations in the life of Yahweh's people. Suffice it to point out a few of the resulting portrayals of the deity.

- Any larger association of people wants its own God to be first in power and authority. Psalm 29 challenges other deities by using elements of Canaanite myth to acknowledge the supremacy to Israel's God: "Ascribe to Yahweh, O heavenly beings, ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength ..." (v. 1).
- Psalm 104, apparently following Egyptian hymnic tradition,

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Jörg Jeremias, *Theophanie* (WMANT 10, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (HSM 5, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

<sup>26</sup> The Pentateuch and the Prophets quite frequently touch on Yahweh's battles for his people, cf., for example, Exodus 14-15; 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 20; Judges 4-5. A terrible description of the blood-splashed warrior-god appears in Isa 63:1-6.



lauds the heavenly constructor of the world in a theological effort to show his creative capacities: "O Yahweh, my God, you are very great, you are clothed with honour and majesty ...!" (v. 1; cf. the mythical narration of the chaos battle in vv. 2-9).

- The sustenance of the world-order in which Israel has been living is guaranteed by the divine judge over all law-enforcing powers that exist: "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgement ..." (Ps 82:1).
- The supreme authority of Yahweh over nature, kingdoms and powers is majestically expressed in Psalms 95-99, which belong to the Yahweh-Kingship type. These Psalms also demonstrate the adamant will of the people "called by his name" to be recognized, probably in marked contrast to their actual state of destitution, as a valid part of humankind and possibly as the leading one.

On the side of human macro-organizations the most important issues are these: (1) How can we establish and maintain a solid identity over against other political, ethnic, and religious entities? (2) In what ways may internal administration of justice be guaranteed?

Leaving aside for the time being traces of tribal religion centering on the war-god Yahweh, we now briefly turn to Israel's statehood. The Book of Psalms, although composed pretty much in exilic and postexilic times, retains some valuable information on the theological workings of monarchy (e.g. in Psalms 45; 89; 110) and on ancient Zionism (cf. Psalms 46; 48; 76; 132). These memories — be they authentic or modified by exilic and eschatological concerns — demonstrate to what degree hierarchic theological thinking superseded older kinship and tribal outlooks and values. The will and help of God is now channeled by way of dynasty and national symbols of invincibility. Yahweh — who had come into the early tradition as a fierce warrior-god fighting for his tribal clients — becomes, in a way, a state official who is cultically manipulated by the royal government in Samaria or Jerusalem (cf., for example, 2 Kings 22). As such, he is the Lord of internal order and potentially of dominion over less powerful neighbours. Needless to say, kinship religion and local cults that cannot be identified with official state ideology persisted side by side with royal Yahwism, perhaps borrowing here and there concepts and names from the "superior" cult.

Theologically speaking, the Psalms represent a full measure of state-supporting theology around Davidic kingship and Zion-mythology, but do not provide many hints of the prophetic critique so well known from the second part of the canon. Psalms 18; 20; 21; 72 and 144, for example, paint the picture of a victorious monarch, while only a few (later?) exhortations alert to the dangers of human pride, stubbornness and abuse of power (cf. Psalms 78; 95:7-11; 106; 144:3-4; 147:10). The individual supplicant is subsumed under society at large, for society's very well-being is at stake. The state God does not live in solidarity with small groups; his or her face is not the parent-type image, but he or she governs or runs — with equity and justice — a large company of human beings. In spite of all criticism within the Bible itself (e.g. by prophets) we have to admit that theology in the context of larger and anonymous societies is legitimate and necessary to a certain degree. General principles must take a certain precedence over individual needs. Royal Judaeon theology, with its hierarchical state-order, is an attempt to do justice to that particular social context. But to build all theological reflection on a macro-organism such as this, together with its governing deity, would be disastrous. Sadly enough, it was not long before Christian theologies indulged in such error.

#### THE ONLY GOD OF THE EXCLUSIVE CONGREGATION

We have already pointed out<sup>27</sup> the changes that came about during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries within the exilic Judaeon communities. A new type of organization, sociologically speaking to be located between kinship group and macro-society, emerged among the deportees in Babylonia and afterwards with the returnees to Judaea. A decapitated nation turned into a community of faith, existing, as it were, as a separate entity within the pluralistic empires of Babylonian and Persian provenance.<sup>28</sup>

From a sociological perspective, the newly emerging Jewish faith, which was dissected into several creative centers, lacked political unity, hierarchical (monarchic) order. It had, therefore, to build a new identity by utilizing traditions of family, tribal past, priestly extract, etc. In contrast to many displaced peoples and emigrants of

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<sup>27</sup> See LIFE-SETTINGS above.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed analysis and synthesis, cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologien*, 166-216 (chap. 8).

various epochs, the emerging Jewish community succeeded in organizing itself in congregations that rallied around religious symbols such as Torah, Sabbath, and circumcision. The only and exclusive deity became Yahweh, who had proven sufficiently independent of state authorities to remain the God of the religious community. The new structures of life and faith of the Judaeen groups in Palestine, Babylonia, Egypt, and possibly other countries were characterized by several focal points:

- Identification via confessing Yahweh as the exclusive personal and communal God.
- Experience of pluralistic and globalizing societies.
- Submission under foreign rule with concomitant economic exploitation.
- Internal strife in order to assert exclusivist positions.
- Most important, communal life was at one and the same time oriented towards the believing individual and his autonomous decision to adhere to Yahweh alone, and towards the needs and wellbeing of the local communities — in more modern terms, towards the parochial entity, and towards the world-wide Jewish community as symbolized in Temple and Torah.

These focal points of spiritual life became the generative matrixes of theological thinking.

The Psalter, more than most other Hebrew writings, is a treasury of early Jewish theologies. Since the Psalms focus on the exemplaric needs of congregations and their theological solutions, but always with the members as persons in view, several features may be highlighted:

- The importance of individual prayers within the context of congregational worship (cf. the great number of individual psalms in the Psalter).
- The astonishingly strong motivation to draw conclusions from prior salvation history (cf. the so-called history-psalms such as 78; 105; 106; 136).
- The endeavour to concentrate on the Mosaic Torah as the backbone of Jewish identity.
- Numerous examples of psalmic homilies or teachings.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For the latter item, cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Höre, mein Volk, lass mich reden!" (Ps 50,7), *BK* 56 (2001) 21-25.

The image of Yahweh that emerges is of a supreme God, creator and maintainer of the world order, yet also an exclusive, zealous Overlord of his religious community, and the consoler, teacher and provider of each individual adherent.

Yahweh is teacher, wise man, counselor. He himself gives vital instruction to the younger generation, through his precepts (which are probably written: each block of eight acrostic verses features up to ten synonyms for *torah*). Psalm 119 addresses throughout this Instructor-God of the Torah-community:

Blessed are you, O Yahweh;  
teach me your statutes.  
With my lips I declare  
all the ordinances of your mouth, (vv. 12-13)  
I rise before dawn and cry for help;  
I put my hope in your words.  
My eyes are awake before each watch of the night,  
that I may meditate on your promise (vv. 147-48)  
Yet you are near, O Yahweh,  
and all your commandments are true.  
Long ago I learned from your decrees,  
that you have established them forever. (vv. 151-52)

The vocabulary of "teaching," "making understand," and "open the eyes" is prominent in the entire, extensive text. Torah implies salvation, grace and shalom ("all-round wellbeing, bliss," cf. Psalm 1), and Torah is synchronized with the cosmic order:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork ...  
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy ...  
The law [*torah*] of Yahweh is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
Yahweh's decrees are sure,  
making wise the simple... (Ps 19:1,4c, 5a, 7)

In consonance with the universalistic world views of Babylonian and Persian cultures, and in sheer defence against spiritual subjugation by the ruling powers Judaeans claimed the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh over all the earth (Ps 24:1), without forgetting the response of individual persons (Ps 24:2-4). Thus in their temple rituals they elevated their God to the top position:

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is the King of glory?  
Yahweh, strong and mighty,  
Yahweh, mighty in battle.  
Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is this King of glory?  
Yahweh of hosts,  
he is the King of glory. (Ps 24:7-10)

The ancient war traditions of the Yahweh tribes come to the fore in order to give expression to the new, universal theology. Yahweh-Kingship hymns and eschatological songs in the Psalter sometimes underscore more aggressively the quest for Yahweh's world dominion (cf. Psalms 47; 93; 95-99; and Psalms 2; 110, etc.). Reminiscences of past statehood-structures linger in the minds of postexilic Judaeans; they are worked over and partially condensed in feverish expectations of a new reign of David or of the final kingdom of God.

To my mind, this plurality of divine functions in the emerging Jewish community points to a segmentation of theology in different discourses, subject to social groupings within the whole entity of the faithful all over the world — a situation that is also familiar in our churches today. We may consider this a kind of fragmentation of reality, and consequently a breaking up of the Divine. Which do we really prefer: the illusion of wholeness and uniformity, or the stark reality of disquieting, piecemeal theological insight and practice of faith? Ancient communities called upon the personal God with respect to individual and familial necessities. The God of state-order and general ethos played a role in legal administration and in the preaching of equity among the congregation. Yahweh, the God of heaven and earth, was finally the supreme guarantee in all questions of one's larger identity and all instances of conflict with the universalizing ideologies of the time. Naturally, the borderlines between different groups and discourses also allowed for a good amount of fluctuation in terms of language, metaphors, and contents.

From this perspective, the Book of Psalms neither diachronically nor synchronically represents a uniform theology. To the contrary, it exhibits multilayered conceptions of God. We may also suggest possible differences between laypersons' models of God and learned reflections, between wealthy congregants and poor ones, perhaps even between male and female adherents, to the all-embracing Yahweh-faith.<sup>30</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS FOR OUR WORLD

Recognizing layers of theological thinking and conceptualizations within the Psalter does not mean abandoning the basic idea of one world and one all-inclusive God. But it does presuppose the hiddenness of this concept. In our limited theological discourse we are dealing only with contextual models of God; affirmations about an ultimate and exclusivistic Oneness are left to God him/her/itself, but with hope for and belief in a firm foundation of this world and a final convergence of all the centrifugal forces of life.

On the other hand, our own lives according to day-to-day experience are partitioned and dissociated into several levels of existence. The witness of the Psalter, it seems to me, is thus of utmost importance to us. Its depth and theological diversity stimulates an ecumenical chorus of singers and supplicants, mediators and confessors.<sup>31</sup> Just as the early Jewish community in its prayers and songs treasured texts for various groups and occasions — admitting distinctly different models of God side by side (Pentateuch, prophetic canon and wisdom literature still contribute more to these variations) — we also are allowed (better: commissioned) to preach differently in various social contexts. My own experience as a pastor tells me this: The Christian message becomes flesh in particular ways with small groups (for example, in personal counselling and family celebrations), with communal worship and interfaith dialogue, or with national and international discourse on the burning issues of humankind. God today is at one and the same time — and these models are not reconcilable, nor to be smoothed over theologically — the personal partner, the guarantor of justice and equity, and the hidden

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Weibliche Spiritualität in Psalmen und Hauskult," in Walter Dietrich and Martin A. Klopfenstein (eds.), *Ein Gott allein?* (Fribourg: University Press 1994) 349-63.

<sup>31</sup> Cf., for example, Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Singing a New Song: On Old Testament and Latin American Psalmody," *Word & World* 5 (1985) 155-67.

principle and critical yardstick of evolution, science and the world economy.

The quest for unity remains alive in our thinking, because we can hardly exist without a vision of coherence and belongingness. After all, we feel like one determined person with respect to define groups and entities. Our identity seeks to be one and the same in different walks of life. If this is correct, we should remind ourselves that this desired unity does not reside in our own existence. It is not given into our hands, but we are pilgrims on the way toward such a peaceful state of affairs (cf. Psalm 39). We must not claim that unity in order to coerce others to receive it from our hands and be subdued to our whims. The unity of God, the world and human-kind — unity of our own individual existence — is a goal, a gift, and a future glory:

O Yahweh, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Yahweh, you know it completely.  
You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it. (Ps 139:1-4)

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