PLURALISM IN THEOLOGY?
AN OLD TESTAMENT INQUIRY[1]
PART I

SOJOURNERS WE ARE:
SOCIAL ROOTINGS OF BIBLICAL WITNESSES

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Abstract

One of the most serious errors theologians make, at least in the Western hemisphere, has been to see themselves as having the absolute truth, so that all other theological positions become error. This arrogant certitude has a long history. It can be found in some biblical writings, and even in some ancient Near Eastern documents written long before Israel came into being. Circumstances and realities, however, do not support those lofty claims. We live in a transient world: Our bodies, minds and capacities are not of the eternal fibre we wish they were. Even if divine actions and words descended into our time and space they would become stale and decay, like the manna of Ex 16, as we attempted to conserve, formalize, and manipulate them. Theology is essentially a thoroughly transient science; God-talk is a precarious affair: The words cannot be fixed but must constantly be renewed. To ears attuned to Western theological attitudes, Biblical witnesses do not point to enduring stability and unchangeable validity: They teach the transience, contextuality, and pluralism of human theological insights.

This article (together with Part II that will follow later) presents a brief survey of concurrent as well as successive models of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures. These paradigms are tied to clearly recognizable social organizations.

Key Concepts: Old Testament theology, Israelite society, models of faith

Introduction

One of the most serious errors theologians make, at least in the Western hemisphere, is to see themselves as having the absolute truth, so that all other theological positions become error. This arrogant certitude has a long history. It can be found in some biblical writings,[2] and even in some ancient Near Eastern documents written long before Israel came into being.[3] It seems to correspond to an indomitable desire of the human mind to be perfect, to

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[1]   The following article was first delivered as a paper in November 2003 as the Henry Gustafson Lectures at United Seminary of the Twin Cities, New Brighton, MN; in Aug. 2004 the substance of the matter was treated in a postgraduate course of the Theological Faculty of Stellenbosch University, South Africa; cf. also my book on "Theologies in the Old Testament", cited below in note 4.

[2]   Cf. John J Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence", JBL 122 (2003) 3-21.

[3]   Mesopotamian rulers of the 3rd millenniums already legitimate their claims for overlordship by denouncing their opponents as unrighteous and treachery potentates, cf. ES Gerstenberger, "World Dominion" in Yahweh Kingship Psalms: Down to the Roots of Globalizing Concepts and Strategies", HBT 23 (2001) 192-210.

be like God, to act like God, to transcend the limits of transience and relativity. In fact, much of theological reasoning and confessional boldness gives the impression that theologians are majority shareholders of the divine estates, or private secretaries in the heavenly palaces, or butlers in the royal household who devote themselves selflessly to their royal duties.

Circumstances and realities, however, do not support these lofty claims. We live in a transient world: Our bodies, minds and capacities are not of the eternal fibre we wish they were. Even if divine actions and words descended into our time and space they would become stale and decay, like the manna of Ex 16, as we attempted to conserve, formalize, and manipulate them. Theology is essentially a thoroughly transient science; God-talk is a precarious affair: The words cannot be fixed but must constantly be renewed. Leaving aside idealistic patterns of thinking, that is, our customary division between transcendence and immanence, we come to the same conclusions when arguing within other philosophical systems. There is no tangible eternal world within our reach, nor any unalterable meaning. We are constantly involved in the search for fundamentals, but we never capture them. This is what my experience as a pastor and teacher of the Bible has shown me. The presence of God, of healing, goodness and salvation are real in faith and hope, but elusive as far as our temporary structures and realities are concerned. Theology is located within the parameters of transience and relativity. It is, in essence, nothing but a faltering attempt to point towards the depth and immutability, which we surmise, but are unable to grasp. To ears attuned to Western theological attitudes, Biblical witnesses do not point to enduring stability and unchangeable validity: They teach the transience, contextuality, and pluralism of human theological insights.

A brief survey of concurrent as well as successive models of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures follows. To some extent these paradigms are tied to clearly recognizable social organizations.[4]

1.   Family and Clan-religion

For endless millenniums human beings lived solely in small wandering bands, gathering foodstuffs, hunting game, moving on, when resources failed. The experience of these immense periods of life in primary or kinship-groups is deeply entrenched in collective memory, perhaps even fixed in genetic structures. Until the dawn of recent history – about ten thousand years ago – social organizations were limited to archaic and archetypical bands of humans, numbering perhaps 20 or 30 individuals and forming a tightly-knit, interdependent social unit. The survival of all could be achieved only by favourable living conditions, and – most of all – by close cooperation and solidarity among the members of the group. Isolation from the band was dangerous. A bronze-age man found recently in the Alps (we call him "Össi") had the point of an arrow in his body. He seems to have been isolated from his group and hunted down by his enemies. Lack of resources or internal rivalry would split bands, as we see in the story of Lot and Abraham (Gen 13:1-12). The age-old mentality of small-group life has influenced human thinking up or down to our own times, although family structures have changed radically as a result of industrial ways of production. Even today, modern ideas of exclusively individual happiness compete with a primeval longing for human warmth in a closed group situation.

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[4]   My study: "Theologies in the Old Testament" (translated by John Bowden from the original German: "Theologien im Alten Testament", Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2001) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002 gives more details on the social rootings of faith in Ancient Israel.

Given these circumstances it is small wonder, indeed, that the original living conditions shaped, to a large extent, not only mental frames and worldviews of emerging humankind, but also its religious beliefs. The Bible's sober acknowledgement of this fact is astonishing. The oldest stories about the wandering fathers and mothers in faith tell about specific religious experiences and theological conceptions, which cannot easily be compared with later encounters of Yahweh, the terrifying Mountain God. In fact, the book of Joshua flatly states at one point, "Long ago your ancestors ... lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods" (Josh 24:2). Jacob does away with the "alien Gods" (Gen 35:2) and Moses according to tradition fully recognizes that the divine name he is encountering is a totally new and unheard of one (Ex 3:14; 6:3). Thus, the Hebrew heritage has faithfully preserved millenary memories of fundamental shifts in God-experience and God-talk, linked to different forms of social organization.

What then was the essence of family and clan-religion in the old times? How does this basic experience of the Divine within intimate circles of human life linger on in subsequent history of faith? The kinship band of old was the fundamental group of survival; we find their predecessors in the animal kingdom. It was at the same time the group that worked, played, believed, rejoiced, and mourned together. Since it included members of both sexes and different ages as well as physical and mental capacities, it strictly divided all essential chores among each other. The group – in order to maintain its strength – also took care of the sick, handicapped, young, and frail. It could survive only in close collaboration and firm solidarity. A firm network of customs and social roles ensured the coherence of the group. Division of labour principally along gender lines was an important part of this.[5] Religion perfectly adapted itself to this context.[6] The deity of the small group was like a family-patriarch or matriarch. He or she belonged to the group. It is very likely that in the remote past ancestor worship played an important role at this level of social organization. What is called in modern research a "personal God" was in ancient reality the leading, more than human, power to guarantee the security of the familial group and give guidance to it. Just as theology is always situated within the boundaries of given human entities – a child's fantasy potentially moulds godly images as profoundly as a dictator's does – so small group living conditions all along have shaped the conceptions of the Divine. Or vice versa: The absolute manifests itself on different levels of human existence; family horizons receive the Unspeakable in the form of a more or less benign patriarchal or matriarchal authority. In essence: In the realm of small group theology God is the provider of food, and housing, and progeny; the healer of sickness and protector against all evils. As Jacob puts it in his famous contract with a still unknown Deity near Bethel:

> If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then Yahweh shall be my God. (Gen 28:20-21).

In a very down-to-earth way the ancient family lived face to face with its superior chief. The relationship was personal throughout, there was no great concern for heaven and earth, humanity at large, statehood or international affairs. It seems to me, bearing in mind that

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[5] Besides a good number of sociological studies about gender divisions the best treatise of the subject in the Old Testament field is that of Carol Meyers, "Discovering Eve", Oxford: University Press 1988.

[6] Albrecht Alt was the first to notice the particular character of family religion in the Hebrew Scriptures: idem, "The God of the Fathers" (1929), in: Essays *on Old Testament History*, translated by RA Wilson, Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1967, 1-100. A recent extensive study is that of Karel van der Toorn, "Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel", Leiden: Brill 1996. Cf. also Erhard S Gerstenberger, "Yahweh the Patriarch", translated by Frederick J Gaiser, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996.

kinship groups have been the most fundamental human clusters of unfathomable duration that the experiences with divinity in this very realm are still at the centre of our present day theology. We cannot do without the personal God, vigilant on our behalf, disposed to save us from dangers and provide sustenance. This statement is not borne out of a small-group romanticism and concomitant distrust of larger social structures, but it simply arises from the age-old preponderance of familial ties in human history. Thus, we may say, theology came into being with the problems and achievements of intimate communion within the nuclei of human society.

Ideally one should view the cultic and ethical consequences of familial experiences of the divine in some detail. However, because of the limitations of space only a brief sketch is given of what we can discern in matters of family observances and norms. The Hebrew Scriptures again are quite lucid on both issues, although they do not provide scholarly reflections or treatises. As can be deduced clearly from the occurrence of תְּרָפִים ("house-gods") in a few passages, notably in Gen 31:30-35; 1 Sam 19:13; Judg 17:3-5 cf. Exod 21:5-6, the protective family deity existed in many ancient Israelite homes. Quite probably these literary vestiges have to be seen in conjunction with the large number of clay-figurines of mostly nude female deities and small incense altars found in ancient Israelite cities. Taken together, they seem to indicate that family religion in Israel (corroborated by similar observations in other ancient Near Eastern cultures) had been practised for a long time before tribal and state organisations were established. Later house cults existed side by side with superior cult arrangements until they finally – probably only in exilic-postexilic times – were banned under the new exclusive veneration of Yahweh. If we accept this, we can go on to surmise that women in Ancient Israel did have a particular affinity with the deities of the kinship group. It is quite likely that they were responsible for cultic affairs in their small social units. Males, according to widely spread divisions of labour, were outdoor hunters, shepherds, guardians of property. Their original religious duties possibly included yearly pilgrimages to a regional sanctuary, as we witness in the case of Elkana (1 Sam 1). But regular house-cults before a little shrine or figurine may have been the responsibility of the principal wife in each home. Further evidence for home-bound sacred rites may be found in the psalms of individual complaint and thanksgiving.[7]

Ethical orientation in family groups was of supreme importance. Only if properly educated, could the individual members become a loyal and useful part of the surviving group. Yet, we do not know the precise nature of and working mechanisms of this ethical orientation. All of the norms preserved in the Hebrew writings are of later origin, pre-supposing, as it were, communities of larger dimension than the family. Most of the old family-ethos probably was a configuration of behaviour, best described as unconditional solidarity. The members of each group had to assist each other in a special, prioritizing way which is still evident even in our own crumbled, atomized family structures. Each member of the familial group had to commit him or herself fully to the common good. And each member could in turn count on the other members of the family for help in every critical situation. Brothers would together face any external enemies (Gen 34; Ps 127:5). Sisters, although at times in bitter competition, might take a stand against their own father, while defending their husbands (Gen 31:14-16). Blood revenge is a natural outcome of this absolute priority of one's own family bonds. Sexual taboos certainly were kept within household groups (cf. Lev 18:6-18),[8] and the authority of father and mother seems to have

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[7]   Cf. Erhard S Gerstenberger, "Psalms (FOTL XIV and XV)", 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988 and 2001.

[8]   Cf. Erhard S Gerstenberger, "Leviticus. A Commentary" (Old Testament Library), Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1996, 245-254.

been a pillar of family unity. In short, all the members ideally formed a tight and unified body. Caring for one another, sharing resources and defending common interests were the mores of the intimate group, which were taught by the older persons to all those who grew up in the family or who were incorporated into it. Needless to say, such special solidarity certainly was sanctioned by the Deity. Family loyalty was a sacred duty; David used it as an excuse to disobey his royal master Saul (1 Sam 20:5-6.28-29), just as the Navajo worker in a sawmill had to take part in a "sing", a shamanistic healing ritual, of his clan.[9]

2.   Faith in Village and Town Populations

Sedentary life in larger communities was quite different from existence in small primary kinship bands. Any communitarian social organisation transcended familial horizons. In this case, several or many kinship groups lived together in a settlement. They continued to do their work as farmers on nearby fields and pastures. But they made common cause, seeking protection from marauding elements, be it in a walled or unwalled neighbourhood. The precondition of this kind of development was the invention of farming techniques. The transition from hunting and gathering to an agrarian subsistence economy is in itself an important step in human civilization. In the ancient Near East it happened as far back as the 7th and 6th millenniums BC. But settling down to sedentary farming had to be re-invented ever so often in that region, as ethnic or social groups at one point or another turned back to nomadic ways or else immigrated from outside the region.[10] Whenever such nomads or semi-nomads tried to settle down again, the conflict with old city populations was una- voidable. The ancient Israelites who arrived in Canaan, were already farmers and used to community life. They spread over the hill country of today's Palestine and for the most part organized themselves in rather modestly sized villages and towns. Family structures were vital in this ancient society. In this ancient society, collateral communitarian forms of organisation, however, complemented and superseded the older parameters.

Let us try briefly to imagine the particularities of living together in a larger than family grouping. Neighbours were not related by blood. What they shared were common interests and threats and dangers. The group had to defend itself against enemies, and, perhaps more importantly, organize an orderly as well as fruitful coexistence among the different social sub-units. Furthermore, any conglomerate of more than family size leads to intellectual, technical, religious activities in accordance with common needs and expectations. Settlements, in short, created a new and different climate of living together.

For our purposes it is crucial to recognize the new theological dimensions within communities of about 100 to 500, in some cases up to 2000 inhabitants, as we see them in ancient Palestinian villages and towns.[11] The struggle for survival still involved family labour and religion. But shared seasonal problems with rain, winds, heat had opened the spiritual eyes of the people and they stood in awe before divine powers inherent in nature. The need to seek justice in conflicting familial interests or in case of serious transgressions against life and property of one's neighbour called for a supervising and authoritative deity.

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[9]   I am referring here to information given to me while working with the Presbyterian Mission at Fort Defiance, Arizona in 1960.

[10]   Norman Gottwald, "The Tribes of Israel", New York: Orbis 1979 makes the early Israelites a conglomerate of nomadic elements (the Moses group) and run-away Canaanite citizens.

[11]   Archaeology has contributed much knowledge about Israelite settlements and ways of life, cf. I. Finkelstein, "The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement", Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society 1988; H Weippert, "Palästina in vorhellenistischer Zeit, Handbuch der Archäologie, Vorderasien II/1", München: CH Beck 1988; Michael Avi-Yonah *et al* (eds.), "Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy land", 4 vols., London: Oxford Univ. Press 1975-1978.

Thus new theological concepts came into being in the communitarian structures. The local deities were different from the familial protective Gods. They took care of the needs and desires, anxieties and joys of a more sizable association of human beings. Or, to spell it out from our perspective: The one and absolute God revealed him or herself to citizens as the patron of community life who sanctioned civil order, provided moisture, pasture and abundant harvests, warded off enemies etc.

It is quite impressive to see how the Hebrew Scriptures acknowledge and sometimes idealize this stage of religious affairs. Some historical accounts freely tell about the fact, verifiable by archaeologists, that each settlement had a very simple, archaic open air sanctuary, where people got together for sacrifice and feasting. Samuel in one account presided over the yearly event (1 Sam 9:11-14). Some towns may have owned small temple buildings, like Shilo, Nob, Arad (1 Sam 1-2; 21:1-10),[12] but these solid buildings and institutions seem to have exercised more than local functions. Be it as it may, the sanctuaries of old throughout Israelite territory – condemned and banned by later theological thinkers – were vital for ancient Israelite communitarian life, and they existed until at least the end of the Judaean monarchy. Only exilic and postexilic developments made them obsolete; they were prohibited by deuteronomic law (Deut 12). The neighbourhood God constituted a new and specific type of deity and religious faith. He or she had nothing to do with tribal or state Gods, nor with the protective power of the family.

From our vantage point we observe, then, a very colourful cultic life in Israelite villages and towns during the monarchic period. "On every high hill and under every green tree", as Jer 2:20 vehemently laments, villagers would venerate a variety of other Deities than Yahweh. Internal relations between families and people had to be regulated by custom and institutions like the council of elders. Chiefs of families would constitute a governing body for each settlement – a very ancient and fairly democratic arrangement in the Near East.[13] The book of Ruth, likely composed in the 4th century B.C., refers to the jurisdiction of city elders (Ruth 4:1-11).[14] The prophet Ezekiel quite naturally deals with elders of townships even in the Diaspora (Ez 14:1; 20:1-3). The communitarian way of life, especially in emerging capitals, stimulated the collection and discussion of ethical traditions. It was among citizens that codes of behaviour like the original "Book of Alliance" in Ex 21:1-23:19 were brought together. In addition, the process of socialization of young people was formalized above the level of individual families. We find in the Hebrew Scriptures a variety of ethical norms, mostly fashioned as negative counsels or "prohibitives": "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal" (Exod 20:13-15). These early catalogues of socially destructive acts seem to be there to protect community structures and individuals. Counsels of wisdom exercised milder pressures to keep up good, established order (cf. Prov). To sum up: In the history of humankind settled agrarian societies posed a serious challenge to the art and capability of social organisation beyond family and kinship ties. Theological concepts accompanied the transition to a different social structure. The ancient Near East went through a change to agrarian settlement starting probably as early as the tenth millennium BC. Israel's tradition much later, that is, sometime during the first half of the first millennium BC, reflects an analogous movement

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[12] Arad's temple is known only by archaeological discovery, cf. Volkmar Fritz, "Tempel und Zelt" (WMANT 47) Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag 1977, 41-75; Wolfgang Zwickel, "Der Tempelkult in Kanaan und Israel" (FAT 10) Tübingen: Mohr 1994.

[13] M van de Mieroop, "The Ancient Mesopotamian City", Oxford: University Press 1997; C Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Stadt und Eidgenossenschaft im Alten Testament" (BZAW 156) Berlin: de Gruyter 1983.

[14] Cf. Irmtraud Fischer, Rut (HThKAT) Freiburg: Herder 2001, 231-234.

from family to community religion. Exclusive faith in Yahweh had not yet appeared on the scene.

3.   Tribal and State Societies

Tribal and state-organisations were clearly distinct social structures with all their consequences for theological concepts and cultic ritual. Biblical witnesses are very aware of this fact; transition from tribal leadership to monarchy is recorded to have caused a good deal of conflict in ancient Israel (cf. Judg 9; 1 Sam 8). Nevertheless, these two forms of government had some elements in common. At this point, I want to emphasise features shared with family and village religion, but also highlight one particularity for each of these larger societal patterns.

Both tribe and state by far exceeded families, clans, and settled neighbourhoods in the number of individuals involved. While we may consider 10 to 20 people as a normal measure for a household, and 200 to 500 habitants as a medium figure for Israelite villages and townships, tribes and states – small as they may have been – were normally counted in thousands of heads. That means that in sheer size those larger social aggregates had outgrown the bounds within which all members may have a personal relationship which each other. During pre-historic millenniums human beings had become accustomed to living in intimate kinship groups. There had been plenty of time to internalize the rules of solidarity of family existence. After beginning to settle down and forming communities, people had to learn new ways of social togetherness, and they had only a few millenniums to do so, before larger conglomerations, tribes and states were established. These challenged human intellect and faith once more, because new rules of social conduct had to be invented and designed. Let us extend our vision of developing civilizations to our own time: As soon as larger societies came up in human history, let us use the example of the 4th millennium B.C., an indomitable compulsion arose to unite the whole earth under one rule. In our time, globalization has followed all too quickly upon the creation of states. And since there has been very little time, in comparison to the original ways of life in kinship bands, to create new codes of behaviour was extremely short, we lag behind in giving a good order to all the communities at large, including a freshly, over-globalized humanity. In consequence, people are still unsophisticated in their relationships with foreigners and strangers beyond tribal, national, cultural, and religious lines.

Larger societies than family and neighbourhood groups are essentially anonymous in character. They cannot be otherwise. Nobody is able to keep up personal communication with more than a hundred or at the utmost two hundred persons. Therefore large groups have to build up "artificial" or "secondary" relational ties, networks of communion, systems of mutual acceptance, rights, and duties. Every effort in this direction in ancient times was accompanied by religious overtones. Just as small groups and neighbourhoods responded to the presence of the Divine by creating respective cults and theological concepts, larger societies would react to manifest superior powers in their own way. At stake were, both in tribal and state organisations, the common interests of all the sub-groupings and individuals combined. Their common grounds, be they economic, political, cultural in nature, called for divine protection and guidance. As always in human experience, "lower" interests entered into conflict with those "higher" ones. But as long as the broader horizon also promised some benefit to particular ambitions larger social entities prevailed. God, in order to take account of the needs and aspirations of an anonymous society became a more distant and more powerful authority, not so easily approached by insignificant individuals.

At this point we need to list the specific profiles of tribal and state religions. Tribes, in ancient and modern times, were but loose alliances of clans, usually for the purpose of self-defence. In the ancient Near Eastern context they had and still have martial features, comparable to North American Indian associations in the 19th century. It is only here that we meet, in the history of ancient Israelite religion, the new deity Yahweh, formerly unknown to the wandering fathers. Yahweh was a lone mountain and tribal deity in the southern/south-eastern deserts. Israel adopted him as a chieftain of war against hostile tribes, city-states or imperial armies (cf. Judg 5:2-5; Exod 15:21). His symbolic seat was the ark carried into battle (Num 10:35-36; 1 Sam 4:1-11). He demanded total dedication and enthusiastic engagement until death (Num 6:1-8; Judg 16:23-30). Yahweh was very probably venerated in the war rituals preceding and following the call for holy campaigns (Judg 19:29-30; 20:1-3.26-28; 1 Sam 11:4-8). His character as God of (mostly defensive) wars comes out clearly in Hebrew theological conventions, although tradition has worked and reworked them over the centuries.

Monarchy is at the same time a continuation of tribal constitutions and a deep break with them. The struggles to introduce a kingdom in Israel reverberate in the Scriptures, and they carry highly theological emphases. The Bible does not hide the fact that change to monarchical structures in reality meant a change in faith (cf. Judg 9; 1 Sam 8:4-22). The theological formula for this shift is reflected in a Yahweh-speech to Samuel: "They have not rejected you but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam 8:7). In fact, the monarchic constitution of old (and well into modern times!) was such, that the authority of God was channelled exclusively through the royal office. The high point of royalist theology in Hebrew writings can be found in 2 Sam 7, with its divine promise: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." (v. 16). As the context shows, the temple is incorporated into the royal administration as a warrant of God's presence (v. 13), religion turns to be a state affair. The monarch himself inevitably becomes the representative of God on earth, as some royal psalms suggest (cf. Ps 2; 45; 110). We do not know very much about the cultic realization of these theological concepts in Israel. But we may surmise that the Judean king always played an important role in temple affairs. After all, the priests did function as his servants, and later depictions still show the royal figure concluding alliances between God and himself on behalf of the people (cf. 2 Kings 11:4-14 – Joas) or acting as the main liturgist in a worship service (1 Kings 8 – Salomo) or arranging meticulously the priestly and levitical offices (1 Chron 16; 23-26 – David). In the ethical realm we recognize tendencies in some Hebrew Writings to add loyalty to the Davidic dynasty to the array of religious duties. This is a logical consequence of state religion: Whoever dares to doubt the wisdom of royal decisions or even thinks of impairing the divinely authorized figure commits a transgression against God. After all, the king is the Messiah, Yahweh's sanctioned vice-regent (cf. 1 Sam 24:7; 2 Sam 16:5-14; 1 Kings 2:36-46).

From the scant authentic evidence we have in the prophetic writings (the largest parts of which were composed and edited only in the exilic-post-exilic period) we conclude that northern and southern monarchs met a considerable amount of religiously motivated opposition. Men and women of God spoke out against the ruling class, either on behalf of impoverished parts of the rural population and/or against illicit cult practices of nobles and burghers. We cannot presuppose, according to our evaluation of religious developments in Israel, that Yahwistic faith had already gained full dominance over all layers of society during the monarchy. Therefore, prophetic preaching probably focused on king, court, and upper classes. The God proclaimed was the God of justice as perceived in village, town, and possibly tribe and (ancient Near Eastern) states. This deity resented the royal arrogance

of power; he or she did not support dynastic interests but instead took sides with the subjects. A very drastic manifestation of disdain over against haughty rulers and sympathy with plain folks is the famous parable of Jotham (Judg 9:7-14). The most respected and useful trees decline any offer to assume "kingship" over other trees, because they do not want to lose their roots, stop giving their produce to mankind, and "sway over" their counterparts. This also means to say, that the ancient opposition against royal exercise of power contained elements of an early design of democracy. The people, probably represented by clanish and tribal chieftains, constituted the support group of authentic prophets during the monarchies in Israel. And they spoke either in the name of local deities or by commission of Yahweh, the tribal and state deity of the time.

4.   Modern Perspectives

How can we evaluate the results of this initial sweeping survey? There is ample evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures that Israelite religion was never a homogeneous unit, but differentiated according to social configurations. Family, village, tribe and state had their specific ways of theologically conceptualizing the Divine. Diverse manifestations of God existed side by side, in conflict or in succession to each other, depending on the social structures of society. There was peaceful coexistence of some forms of faith until the end of the monarchy. Each Israelite might adhere to a protective deity at home, a goddess of fertility at a local sanctuary, the tribal Supreme Warrior in his region and finally, a state deity of monarchic attire supplanting the tribal outlook.

I fully realize that this analysis is a modern scholarly, and largely sociological one which is not completely congruent with ancient views or analyses. Yet, we are bound to use our own means of looking at the world, not those of our ancient ancestors. They, in turn, not always but quite often divided the world in two neatly separated compartments, the human and the divine. God would intervene from the outside, humans would react to him or her. The divine world, however, to them seemed open and perspicuous, governing and permeating earthly conditions, although they prudently refrained from indiscrete depictions of God. In consequence, they easily could make God, by the mouth of human speakers or any other means, reveal him or herself to humans. We are more cautious, I hope, in doing theology from "the other side". We are more conscious of the human conditioning of all our insights and experiences. Therefore we, too, may speak of God, the absolute one (without understanding fully, what that means!), to whom humans are responding by their theo-logical discourse. However, we really have to focus, in scholarly arguments, on the shape and contents of our response. For them we are fully responsible, but not for the eternal truth, the divine presence, which we are trying to react to.

If this is the case, it is our right and responsibility to recognize the various shapes of theology in the Scriptures, in their tensions and beautiful richness. We are not entitled to flatten out these diversities, simply alleging the Oneness of the Absolute. In a second step we must go on to analyze our own present day realities in order to discover the affinities with Biblical witnesses. And they are waiting to be detected: Life in families, small and intimate groups, larger associations and huge, anonymous societies and organisations still continues today. We shall discover how many correspondences there are, and at the same time how different modern social and cultural conditions are from those prevalent in antiquity. Then, and only after this tedious journey back and forth to the ancient models of faith, do we have the right to construct our own theological concepts, in the face of the one God in and for one World.