The Religion of the Bible

We must first understand that biblical religion is not, strictly speaking, "biblical" because, unlike Judaism and Christianity, it is not a religion based on the Bible—i.e., the canonized record of past divine revelation—but on that revelation itself. Also, it is not a "religion," in the sense of the beliefs and practices of an actual community. Rather, biblical religion was a minority, dissident phenomenon, always at odds, as the Bible itself states, with the actual religions of the small kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The religion of the latter might better be termed Israelite-Judean religion. For more than a century the difference between biblical and Israelite-Judean religion has been an axiom of modern biblical studies (see discussion below).

Moreover, biblical religion is not a unity but rather a congeries of differing and often competing opinions and traditions. Historical scholarship has isolated at least three major forms of biblical religion in the Bible:

1. Deuteronomic-covenantal religion, based on the legal form of a treaty between Israel and its deity, emphasizing Israelite loyalty and the performance of divine commandments, viewed as stipulations of the treaty.

2. Priestly religion, centering on the cult and emphasizing purity and punctilious observance of rituals.

3. Wisdom religion, focusing on understanding the cosmos and the laws of human nature, and dealing with such general problems of human existence as suffering and theodicy.

Despite considerable mutual influence and interpenetration, these three major types of biblical religion are best examined individually.

We shall first summarize the little that is known, or surmised, about Israelite-Judean religion, and then take up each of these major streams of biblical religion in turn.

Israelite-Judean Religion

The actual religion of the states of Israel and Judah from ca. 900 to 600 BCE can be partially reconstructed from archeological and inscriptional evidence and from some evidence in the biblical text, which must be interpreted with caution, because the Bible stands in a polemical relationship to the contemporary religions of Israelites and Judeans, consistently distorting the real meaning of such features as the "high places" (*bamot*, translated "open shrines" in NJPS [e.g., 1 Kings 3.2]). Northern, Israelite religion was especially misrepresented by the propaganda of the predominantly southern, Judean authors and editors of most of the Tanakh. For these reasons the following sketch is conjectural, but represents the generality of current scholarly opinion.

There is no question that the national deity of both Israel and Judah was YHVH (LORD in NJPS), but the relationship to this deity might be better called monolatrous, the worship of one god without denying the existence of others, rather than strictly monotheistic. YHVH is the name regularly, but not exclusively, appearing as the theophoric or divine element in Israelite-Judean names. YHVH's attributes, as expressed in the oldest examples of Israelite

poetry, such as the Song of Deborah (Judg. ch 5) and the Blessings of Jacob (Gen. ch 49) and Moses (Deut. ch 33) seem to be a mixture of features attested in Canaanite and Ugaritic religions for the ancient creator god El, the "old god" (*'ilu du 'alami* = Heb *'el 'olam*, "Everlasting God" [Gen. 22.33]) and the young vigorous fertility-storm god, Baal. YHVH is usually portrayed as seated on His heavenly throne, surrounded by the angelic host waiting in attendance, like Canaanite El; or, like Baal, either mounted in the divine chariot, or riding on the "wings of the wind/cherubim." Derived from the latter deity is the pervasive theophanic imagery, namely depictions of the deity appearing with storm clouds, thunder, lightning, earthquake, etc., so familiar to Bible readers. Holy war themes, in which YHVH leads His hosts in battle, are also similar to those elsewhere in the ancient Near East. YHVH is often portrayed as setting out for battle, armed with the divine spear, bow and arrows, against Israel's foes (Ps. 18.7–16; Deut. 32.22–25, 41–42; Hab. 3.3–13; etc.).

Perhaps mingled with, and partially absorbed by, YHVH was a type of god reflecting an older type of religion centering on a familial deity, often referred to simply as the "god of X" (X being the name of an ancestor of the family or clan) or, more generally, as the "god of the fathers." Evidence for this kind of religion comes mainly from the patriarchal narratives of Genesis ("God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob") and is otherwise attested in the Near East from Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE to, much later, the region of the Nabatean Arabs (centered in Jordan) in Roman times.

In sum, the major attributes of YHVH that continued in biblical religion were already found in Israelite-Judean religion: king, creator, father, warrior, provider of fertilizing rain. Since many of the oldest texts (e.g., Judg. 5.4) refer to YHVH as "coming from the south" (Seir, Paran, Sinai/Horeb), He originally may have been a god of one of the regions south of Judah. But even in old texts He has already absorbed the attributes of several kinds of ancient Near Eastern deities, to become a kind of over-arching deity. The name YHVH may be attested in pre-Israelite documents from the Amorite region of upper Mesopotamia. In the Bible the name is explained as referring to His ability to protect Israel (*'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh*, "I shall be what I shall be" [Exod. 3.14]) interpreted in context as "I shall be with you." The original sense of the name may refer to God as creator (taking "YHVH" as causative *hiphil*, "He brings into being") or it may have some other, lost connotation.

One of the most discussed issues in recent years is whether YHVH had a female consort, the ancient Canaanite mother/fertility goddess Asherah, identified with the tree of life. Two Hebrew inscriptions contain benedictions in the name of "YHVH and his Asherah." Scholars are divided in opinion whether Asherah here referred to the goddess herself, or whether the term has been reduced to an abstract hypostatization of YHVH's power to provide fertility. More evidence is needed, but in any case it is certain that biblical religion, in possible contrast to Israelite-Judean religion, viewed Asherah simply as a Canaanite deity and her symbol, reduced to a wooden pole, as idolatrous.

YHVH was worshipped at "high places" scattered around the country, which varied from simple hilltop shrines with stone or earthen altars, cultic pillars (*matzevot*), and wooden poles (*'asherot*), to larger structures such as the main high places in the Northern Kingdom, Dan and Bethel, where YHVH was worshipped as a calf. In biblical religion the high places are viewed propagandistically as totally idolatrous from the time of Solomon on, since all "legitimate" worship was to be confined to the Jerusalem Temple. Ironically, the latter itself was a typical Canaanite shrine, built by the Phoenicians, with three divisions, the last of which was the "Holy of Holies," with altar, cultic pillars, elaborate decoration of palmettes, lotus, bulls, and cherubim. According to the main traditions of the Bible, the Holy of Holies contained no divine image, as in typical ancient shrines, but only the Ark of

the Covenant containing the stone tablets given by YHVH to Moses. The Ark seems to have had its origin in the kind of box-like palladium still used by some Bedouin tribes. Mounted on a camel, it leads their migrations, as the Israelite Ark is said to have led Israel in the desert (Num. 10.33). The Ark also led the army into battle according to texts describing the early period. Its capture by the Philistines caused a major religious crisis (1 Sam. chs 4–6). According to the Bible, the Ark was brought to newly conquered Jerusalem by David and was placed by Solomon in the Temple, where it was viewed by many as the throne of YHVH. It is not mentioned thereafter, and its later fate is unknown.

Israelite-Judean religion seems to have had aniconic tendencies; it avoided depicting YHVH through any image or icon. Later biblical religion condemns images of deities vehemently, and has suppressed all evidence of their legitimate use, except for the cryptic reference to human-like statues called teraphim, attested in a few places, like Gen. 31.34 and 1 Sam. 19.13, which seem to have been family deities, or talismans. It is possible that the strange story in Judg. chs 17–19 of the image stolen by the Danites, which became the center of a cult served by a priesthood descended from Moses, preserves the memory of an image of YHVH worshipped in some circles. Archeological evidence has as yet turned up no divine images in an excavated shrine, though of course such valuable objects probably would have been removed or looted in antiquity. Israelite-Judean sites do contain large numbers of different types of female figurines, some of which probably represent the fertility goddess Asherah. Such images are usually viewed by scholars as amulets, and as belonging to "popular," not "official," religion (see below).

Worship of YHVH consisted of sacrifices, the oldest of which seem to have been the "whole offering" *('olah)*, the "communal offering" *(shelem)* and, probably, the "sin (or purification) offering" *(hata't)*. Pilgrimages were made to local shrines on sacred occasions. Old biblical texts show that the three major festivals, two in the spring, one in the fall (later called Passover-Matzot, Shavuot, and Sukkot), along with the new moon and Sabbath were occasions for such visits, though it is unclear if in Israelite-Judean religion the Sabbath was already associated with the seven-day week. A yearly pilgimage is also attested at which a communal offering was made and consumed by the family (1 Sam. ch 1). The elaborate cultic establishment described in the Torah, especially in Leviticus, is held by most scholars to be a development of later biblical religion projected back into the past, but it undoubtedly contains elements reflecting the actual cults of Israel and Judah, such as the scapegoat ritual on the Day of Atonement, itself probably originally a shrine-cleansing rite.

Curiously, the Bible contains no reference to a New Year festival (the references in Lev. 23.24 and Num. 29.1, later taken to refer to the New Year festival, do not mention that name); yet it is scarcely likely that Israel was the only Near Eastern people without such an event, so crucial to ancient thinking and the actual lives of people. It is likely that biblical religion has expunged all reference to the New Year festival, except for an enigmatic reference to a "Day of Acclaim" *(yom teru'ah)*. Some scholars have hypothesized a New Year festival based on the evidence of some biblical psalms, especially the so-called "enthronement psalms" (Pss. 93, 96–98), and comparative evidence, primarily the Babylonian *akitu* festival. The event might have proclaimed YHVH's victory over cosmic chaos (see below), and His kingship as creator. Certainly, the themes of creation and kingship survive in the later Jewish Rosh Ha-Shanah; but that Israel also had such a festival remains conjectural. If the new year rituals were as close to those of the ancient Near East as suggested by some scholars, biblical religion may have edited the festival out as too redolent of idolatrous practices. Some scholars have also suggested a festival celebrating covenant renewal, held every seven years, based on Deut. 31.10–11; but the exis-

tence of such a cultic event is even more conjectural than that of a New Year festival.

Prophets played a prominent role in both Israel and Judah. Prophecy of various kinds is attested in practically all ancient cultures. In the ancient Near East prophets are found in Egypt and Mesopotamia, where their function was secondary to the dominant oracular means employed. But in western Asia ecstatic prophecy seems to have had a more central significance. The closest parallels to biblical prophecy are found in the Mari texts (in modern Syria on the Euphrates) of the middle second millennium BCE, reflecting an Amorite (West Semitic) culture related to Israel in many respects. There, as in the Bible, prophets, both men and women, are sent to kings to deliver messages, and sometimes rebukes, from deities. Prophets are well attested from areas around Israel, from Phoenicia to Transjordan, where texts have been found mentioning a seer Balaam, evidently the prophet described in Num. 22–24.

But in Israel and Judah prophets seem to have been even more important than in neighboring cultures. Mechanical forms of divination played a less significant role; there is reference to what were probably a sort of sacred dice, the Urim and Thummim, which could give a simple yes-or-no answer to questions. Later, they are said to be stones set in the breastplate of the high priest. There are also references to consulting the spirits of the dead, such as Saul's visit to the woman of Endor, who raised the ghost of Samuel (described as a "god" *['elohim]*) (1 Sam. ch 28). But from an early period, the standard means of "inquiring of God" was through a prophet *(navi')*, also called "seer" *(ro'eh)*, "visionary" *(ḥozeh)*, and "man of God" *('ish ha-'elohim)*.

Prophets were characterized by a non-normal psychological state, ecstasy. When the "spirit of God" entered them they fell (sometimes literally) into a trance and received messages from God. They might appear to be asleep, or babble uncontrollably. Prophecy might be stimulated by music (1 Sam. 10.5; 2 Kings 3.15) and was always related to music through the art of poetry, because much biblical prophecy was composed in rhythmical parallelistic discourse, that is, poetry. The early prophets traveled in bands with a leader in their midst, who might be called their "father"; they themselves were "sons of the prophets." They delivered oracles on everything from lost asses (1 Sam. ch 9) to campaigns in war to the appointing of kings. It is likely that groups of cultic prophets were found at shrines, and royal prophets at the courts of kings. In all of this the role of prophets was probably similar to that in surrounding cultures.

However, some prophets took on a more exalted, and isolated, function in Israel and Judah. Prophecy, represented by the seer Samuel, seems to have been centrally involved in the founding of the monarchy, in the transition from charismatic to royal leadership in the 10th century BCE. The Bible attests to prophetic figures who claim to be empowered to appoint kings, and who presume to remain censors of monarchy and state. They deliver unbidden oracles, often unwelcome to rulers, on state policies, both religious and military. They criticize the people for lack of social concern and for oppressing the poor. Such independent prophets, great figures like Samuel and Nathan in the 10th century, Elijah and Elisha in the 9th, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah in the 8th, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others in the 7th and 6th centuries, far surpass the prophets in the surrounding cultures and are of great importance in the biblical tradition.

The prophets' dominant literary form was the "messenger speech," a discourse purporting to be the direct words of the deity—in structure these were often similar to the message a messenger might deliver on behalf of a king. Many genres were used: laments, parables, hymns, etc., but the central type of speech was the "lawsuit" *(riv)*, which used legal forms to excoriate Israel. The basic outline was a statement of the crime, of an individual, like a king or priest, or of the people as a whole, followed by the sentence passed by the divine court in heaven (of which prophets

seem to have been viewed as human members, transported there in their visions). One often finds also a call to "heaven and earth" to serve as witnesses. Lawsuit oracles were delivered not only against Israel and Judah, but also against surrounding peoples (sometimes called "oracles against the nations"). Although the implied audience is the other nations, the actual audience was Israel-Judah, who were to learn a lesson from these speeches. Most prophets also gave "salvation oracles," predictions of weal and assurances of divine protection, a function that may originally have belonged to cult prophets at shrines. It has also been suggested that many psalms reflect an oracle of salvation delivered by priests, or cult prophets, at the shrine. We shall see below that it was the independent, fearless brand of prophecy that provided the stimulus for the growth of biblical religion out of Israelite-Judean religion, but that prophecy itself eventually became effectively outlawed by later biblical religion.

Did Israelite-Judean religion practice child sacrifice, as surrounding Canaanite religions did? To be sure, the Bible condemns "passing children through the fire to Molech" (probably a form of Baal), but Israelites were acquainted with the practice, and recognized its numinous terror when performed by others (2 Kings ch 3). The prophets condemn those who sacrifice their children at the tophet outside Jerusalem, a place of such horror that it gave its name, Gehenna (*ge' ben hinom*), to the later concept of hell. Biblical religion recognized that the first-born "belong" to YHVH and must be "redeemed." The story of Abraham's binding of Isaac implies that child sacrifice has been superseded, but it also recognizes the significance of the rite as the supreme test of loyalty to YHVH. The story of the unhappy fate of Jephthah's daughter (Judg. ch 11) suggests that the practice of child sacrifice in connection with a strong oath was not unknown in Israel. Certain prophetic texts as well suggest that it was practiced (see, e.g., Mic. 6.7).

Very little is known about the official cult of the Northern Kingdom, beyond the establishment of two royal shrines in Dan and Bethel by Jeroboam I in the 9th century, where worship centered on the images of two calves set up by him, mentioned above. Jeroboam is also said to have established a festival in the eighth month to replace the festival in the seventh month (the New Year festival?) in Judah (1 Kings 12.33).

More is known about the state cult of Judah, which centered in the shrine on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Judean religion seems to have reflected a royal theology, or ideology, based on a covenant (*berit*), an unconditional divine promise to David that his dynasty would rule forever, "as long as the sun and moon exist" (Ps. 89.37–38). The king was viewed as the "son" of God (Pss. 2.7; 89.27; 2 Sam. 7.14), though whether this implied actual royal divinity is questionable. There is little doubt that this royal religion was imported into Judah from primarily Egyptian and Phoenician sources. The terms used to describe the king in the biblical texts that most directly reflect Judean royal tradition, the "royal psalms" (Pss. 2, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89) are used elsewhere only of God. Also prominent in this royal cult were notions of unconditional divine protection of Zion and Jerusalem, amounting to what has been termed a doctrine of the "inviolability of Zion." (This notion is also expressed in Isa. chs 1–39.) It was believed that no enemy could capture the city in which was located God's sacred house, the Temple built and maintained by the king, which was viewed as the royal chapel. The "Zion Psalms" (Pss. 46, 47, 48) are possibly early expressions of this doctrine, which also figures prominently in later prophetic messianic visions (see below). The aim of this political, religious, and cultic complex was undoubtedly to strengthen the claim of the monarchy to legitimacy. It seems to have succeeded, because Judean dynastic kingship remained stable for over three centuries (the brief usurpation by Athaliah is the only exception, and she was a northerner, the daughter of Phoenician Jezebel). Northern Israel, by

contrast, probably lacking such a royal ideology, saw the rise and fall of many ruling houses. The main ideas of royal religion became transmuted in biblical religion into messianic eschatology (see below).

What can reasonably be conjectured about the belief system of ancient Israel and Judah? If one relies only on the biblical evidence, very little can be extrapolated that is not dependent on the dating of the texts—a highly debated enterprise—so that any interpretation must remain to some extent circular. For example, was covenant already a feature of early Israelite religion, or did it rise to prominence only later, in biblical religion? The answer to this question depends on how one dates the biblical covenantal traditions, a topic with little scholarly consensus. The only religious complex of ideas that is more or less unanimously accepted for ancient Israel is the "monomyth" of the primeval battle between YHVH and the dragon-like Sea (Yam, also called Rahab, Serpent, Leviathan, River[s], etc.). This myth is found throughout biblical literature and is usually connected with creation (cf. Pss. 74.13–15; 89.10–11; Isa. 51.9–10; Job 26.12–13, etc.; chapter 1 in Genesis reflects biblical religion and has been largely demythologized, with the exception of a reference to sea monsters in 1.21). But what did the myth mean to ancient Israel? Was it reflected, even reenacted in the cult? Had it been reduced to merely a literary motif? We have no answer for such questions.

The extrabiblical archeological and epigraphic evidence points to little overt difference between Israelite-Judean religion and the religions of surrounding peoples. The religious picture that emerges from the great Moabite inscription of the mid-9th century BCE does not differ from what is described in, and may reasonably be extrapolated from, the older texts of the Bible; except that it is Chemosh, national deity of Moab, who wages holy war on YHVH and puts Israel itself to the ban of extermination *(herem)*. Iconography points in the same direction. Israel and Judah made unrestrained use of the typical Levantine Egypto-Phoenician and Mesopotamian repertoire of motifs: winged sun discs, scarabs, moon god symbols, sacred trees of life, paradise imagery, cherubim (a composite beast with the body of a lion, the wings of eagles, and a human head), winged cobras (seraphim?), etc. Many of these symbols were used on seals, the most personal representation of individual identity, and it is therefore difficult to dismiss them as mere "art." But it is a mystery what such things meant to the Israelites. The full significance of the amulets, especially female figurines, abundant at Israelite sites also escapes us.

Amulets and "pagan" visual symbols are commonly ascribed to "popular" rather than to "official" religion, which supposedly shunned them. Worship at the high places and consultation with the spirits of the dead *('ovot veyid'onim)* are similarly ascribed to "folk religion." But the opposition of "popular or folk vs. official" is inherently polemical and is dependent on individual interpretation; this dichotomy may not reflect the reality of Israelite-Judean religion. For example, it is well known that the Bible presents only a gloomy picture of the afterlife in Sheol, as a shadowy, listless realm cut off from contact with God. But it is becoming ever clearer that the high places, and especially the cultic pillars *(matzevot)* associated with them, point to a belief in some kind of active contact with long-dead ancestors, perhaps even a cult of dead heroes. The communal *marzeah* drinking bouts, condemned by the prophets as "pagan," may also have been thought to enable one to commune with ancestors. Is one to label such things as reflecting only "popular religion"? Or is it more likely that developed biblical religion has edited these practices out and declared them to be "idolatrous?" Similarly, biblical religion reduced the heavenly assembly of divine beings, called "sons of God" (Ps. 29.1), "holy ones" (Ps. 89.6–7) and even "gods" (Ps. 82.1) in older biblical texts, to colorless and nameless "messengers" (angels). But there is every reason to suspect that in Israelite-Judean religion the angels were

the same type of potent, named heavenly forces so prominent in postbiblical religion, especially apocalyptic, and also in rabbinic midrash.

The general picture of Israelite-Judean religion that emerges is of a cult along the same pattern of other cults in the ancient Near East. If the surface conceals some "elusive essence" of an already totally monotheistic, covenantal, Torah-oriented faith, scholarship has not yet discerned it with certainty (see below). It is likely not in Israelite-Judean, but rather in biblical religion—what might be termed the Biblical Revolution—that the essential developments lie.

Biblical Religion

Revolution or Reform?

The complexes of traditions in edited texts that form the evidence for biblical religion date, for the most part, from the 7th to 5th centuries BCE: the Torah, the historical works, the beginnings of the compilation of the prophetic books, the chief wisdom books. Embedded in these works are materials that reflect older stages of biblical religion—its prehistory, as it were—and many traditions of Israelite-Judean religion that have, in the main, been altered to reflect later viewpoints.

A key question is whether biblical tradition is merely a later, more developed stage of Israelite-Judean religion, continuing the same basic religious ideas and tendencies, a viewpoint that posits essential continuity; or whether, conversely, biblical religion marks a basic shift in religion, a reinterpretation of older traditions so radical as to be revolutionary. Continuity or revolution?

The Bible claims continuity from Moses on, with no meaningful development. This single authentic tradition was constantly violated by apostasy, but was also restored in a series of "reforms" by figures such as Josiah and Ezra. Modern critical scholarship overturned the traditional viewpoint by emphasizing the principle of change and development. The classic late 19th century synthesis of Julius Wellhausen posited discontinuity between older Israelite and later biblical traditions. The former was a "nature" religion, not essentially different from the cults of surrounding ancient peoples; the latter was a new kind of faith, rooted in prophetic inspiration. Later, according to Wellhausen, it became a fossilized text-centered religion dominated by Priestly ritual and petty legalism. Such value judgments, reflecting Social Darwinist prejudices, seemed to invalidate Wellhausen's synthesis to many 20th century scholars. William F. Albright and his students tried to show that archeology could demonstrate substantial continuity between Israelite and biblical religions. For example, the covenant traditions were held to go back to recently discovered second millenium models. Some of the patriarchal traditions were demonstrated to have had early roots. Monotheism was related to trends in the late Bronze Age Near East, and so on. A similar attempt at demonstrating essential continuity was made by the Israeli scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann, who attacked Wellhausen's synthesis and tried to show that Israel's religion reflected the same basic ideas from beginning to end. By the end of the 20th century a revisionist reaction against the claims of continuity set in, with claims of discontinuity much stronger than those made by Wellhausen. Some claimed that biblical religion was mainly a product of the Persian and even Hellenistic eras, and that the existence of Israelite-Judean religion, and even of "Israel" itself was chimerical. Some revisionist scholars were justly accused of having political goals.

Which approach is the most justified, on the basis of the biblical and extrabiblical evidence, including archeology? This is not a matter in which one can simply allow the "facts" to speak for themselves, because interpretation plays a key role at every stage of the discussion. But it is possible to list a few major differences between what scholarship generally considers to be typical of earlier vs. later religion:

1. *Monotheism.* Older, especially poetic, texts portray the deity as seated among the as-

sembly of divine beings, who are sometimes, as noted above, called *bene 'el(im)*, ("sons of gods"), *kedoshim* ("holy ones"), among other terms. Statements of divine incomparability echo those commonly found also in extra-biblical hymns; for example "Who is like you among the gods?" (Exod. 15.11). Now, monotheism is really a complex philosophical idea that is very hard to express in biblical language, but later texts, especially Deuteronomy, do seem to be struggling to make overt statements about God's oneness and uniqueness, most famously in Deut. 4.35: "It has been clearly demonstrated to you that the LORD alone is God; there is none beside Him." and (depending on one's interpretation) in the Shema: "Hear, Israel, the LORD, our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6.4). In the Bible, key ideas are generally expressed peripherally, especially by concrete, often ritual actions. A probable sign of real monotheism is the active polemic against idolatry one finds in Deuteronomic texts and in late prophets, like Jeremiah and, especially, Second Isaiah. It (mis)represents other ancient religions as mere fetishism, the foolish worship of images of "wood and stone."

2. *Centralization of worship.* A potent ritual expression of absolute monotheism is the attempt to reflect God's oneness by insisting on one legitimate shrine, the Jerusalem Temple. This is a cultic development of the Deuteronomic movement, perhaps first attempted by Hezekiah in the late 8th century (1 Kings ch 18), and later effected by Josiah in his famous "reform" in 621 BCE (2 Kings chs 22–23). Earlier religion tolerated a multiplicity of altars, a fact obscured by the Deuteronomic editing of most of the historical books. But actions speak louder than words. The fact that Josiah, the paragon of militant piety, did not kill the priests of the "high places" (except for Bethel, the main rival of Jerusalem), but rather allowed them to share the Priestly income of the Jerusalem shrine (2 Kings 23.9) is a tacit admission that local shrines had been considered quite legitimate before. In the context of ancient religion, centralization of worship, which is also reflected in the contemporary Priestly writings (despite some signs of earlier decentralization), was an extremely radical step that deserves to be viewed as revolutionary in the extreme.

3. *Myth vs. history.* It is often said that biblical religion broke with the kind of mythical thinking characteristic of the religions of the ancient Near East in favor of history. God was praised for His great acts of national redemption, such as the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan ("salvation history"). It is true that biblical religion has ousted most of the mythology of the ancient world, with the exception of a few stock themes, like creation, the garden of Eden and YHVH's cosmic battle in primeval times with the sea. Especially the sexual aspects of mythology, involved with the birth and procreation of the gods, have been eliminated (except for a few relics like Gen. 6.1–4). Indeed, it can fairly be stated that the processes of demythologization and desexualization of religion are related to each other and go hand-in-hand in biblical religion.

But it is less certain that biblical religion broke with the concept of myth itself. If one defines myth as narrative that expresses a culture's deepest attitudes and emotions about the origin and nature of the world in which it lives, it is correct to say that biblical religion created new but potent myths of its own. And it is certainly incorrect to hold that biblical religion is historical in any modern, scientific sense. Rather, the unique creation of biblical religion is a blend of history and myth that might best be termed typology, the cyclical recurrence of a few historical patterns, such as national apostasy and repentance, which serve as the basis of a vital historiography. Events are made to reflect, anticipate, and explain each other typologically. For example, the patriarchal narratives foreshadow later Israelite settlement in many ways (a fact the Rabbis recognized and expressed in the principle that "the deeds of the fathers prefigure what will occur to their descendants" *(ma'ase 'avot siman levanim)*. Disparate events are

united by extended and intertwining typologies of creation and redemption. So, the return from exile in Babylonia is viewed as a second exodus from Egypt; the exodus itself is described in such a way as to evoke creation typology, as is the Sinai theophany, and so on. History is valued not for the unique, but for the recurrence of these repeated patterns. It is in this sense that biblical religion may be termed a historical faith.

Was Israelite-Judean religion already historical in this sense? The answer depends on the dating of the texts. Numerous typical ancient Near Eastern mythological themes are, however, prevalent in creation accounts outside Gen. ch 1. Moreover, texts that reflect the royal theology of Judah, which are mostly very old, are also replete with language and themes drawn from ancient mythology. Indeed, that tradition does not even shrink from calling the king the "son of God" (albeit adoptive). Such facts lead one to suspect that the characteristic use of historically rooted typology is likely a feature of biblical, not earlier, religion.

4. *Individualism.* Older religion viewed the individual as a member of society: family, clan, tribe, and nation. Corporate, transgenerational responsibity for sin was the rule, as in the Decalogue ("punishing children for the crime of their fathers to the third, even the fourth generation" [Exod. 20.5]). This notion is often evident even in Deuteronomy, where the Hebrew text often refers to the plural rather than the singular Israelite, suggesting that he or she will be punished or rewarded with the larger group (see e.g., Deut. 11.13–21). Evidence of an overt challenge to this doctrine first appears in the prophets of the late 7th and 6th centuries BCE, Jeremiah and, especially, Ezekiel (Ezek. ch 18). In late texts individual responsibility for sin has become the standard doctrine, as in the book of Chronicles. The belief in individual responsibility for sin went along with an elevated position for women and a new formulation of the nation Israel as a community of committed believers (*'edah, kahal).*

The change was also reflected in new models of piety. Older psalms remain more or less on the level of similar compositions from the ancient Near East. But a new inwardness, focused on individual relationship to God, appears prominently in later psalms, like Pss. 139 and 119. A new concept of the religious individual, totally devoted to God, is especially a feature of developed Deuteronomic religion, and is linked to the new emphasis on the oneness of God. It will be remembered that the Shema continues: "You shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and all your life" (Deut. 6.5). Another sign of the new individualism is a much heightened concern with the problem of individual suffering and the concomitant theological issue of theodicy. It finds expression mainly in later texts such as the "confessions" of Jeremiah (e.g., Jer. 11.18–12.6) and, above all, the book of Job.

5. *Text religion and canon.* The older forms of Israelite religion probably were mainly oral, especially prophecy (at least before the 7th century). But Deuteronomic religion introduced a new text-centeredness by insisting on the unchangeability of the written form of the *torah* ("instruction") given to Moses on Horeb (Sinai). More than any other Torah book, Deuteronomy emphasizes the *sefer* or written document. Nothing may be added or taken away (Deut. 4.2; 13.1). This is the beginning of the notion of immutable canon, an approach to sacred texts quite at variance with the liberal attitude toward textual transmission of most ancient cultures. Indeed, despite this injunction, even biblical traditions remained astonishingly fluid for several centuries after Deuteronomy. But eventually the process of codification, standardization, and canonization set in, beginning with the Torah (probably in the 5th century) and extending gradually to the Prophets and the Writings, a development that was completed by the 1st century CE (or several centuries earlier, according to several scholars). Along with the increasing textualization and literariness of biblical religion went an intertextual aspect of internal commentary and inner-biblical interpretation.

6. *Forms of piety.* A new kind of piety also arose, fostered especially by Deuteronomy, focused on prayer and study. Ritual was not ignored, but it became secondary to teaching and meditation. Attitudes and themes native to the older wisdom tradition were adapted to this new piety, which emphasized study of the written record of divine revelation. It should be noted that biblical religion makes no claim for Mosaic authorship of the Torah as a whole, but only of Deuteronomy (Deut. 31.9). In addition, the older liturgical tradition was revised to make it compatible with strict monotheism, resulting in the type of prayer found in most of the book of Psalms (see discussion below).

These developments fit the general historical and cultural context of the centuries between about 800 and 400 BCE. It was a time of extreme change and uncertainty in the Near East, marked by the rise of a radically new form of political organization, the empire, first of the Assyrians, later of the Neo-Babylonians and the Persians. These world empires made imperial religious as well as political claims, and the policies of mixing of populations through exile and resettlement weakened the old polities of the region. The chief gods of the imperial states were raised to supremacy over other deities. Henotheism, if not true monotheism, and syncretism were tendencies of the age. But uncertainty led to its opposite: cultural, including religious, conservatism, a focus on ancient traditions, and an attempt to present the new as authentically old. The typical literary production of the time is the pseudonymous *fraus pia*, a document that claims to have been written by a sage in hoary antiquity, but which actually fulfills some current need. The "finding" of the book of Deuteronomy in the Temple in 621 BCE, corresponds nicely to this contemporary model. In sum, biblical religion fits the period in question in a general way, and sometimes very specifically.

To return to the original question: Do all of these new developments of the 7th to 5th centuries BCE mark a radically new departure, or only a later stage in the development of Israelite religion? The explosion of new features in the period in question is undeniable, from the scholarly point of view. But at what point does a difference in degree become a difference in kind? At what point is one justified of speaking of something as revolutionary, as radically new, especially if the tradition in question keeps insisting it is really very old, and merely being stripped of later accretions, "reformed"? Probably the claims of continuity vs. discontinuity cannot be judged only on the basis of logic. Rather, one must choose the answer one judges to be best supported by the evidence one accepts, and, it must be admitted, one's private religious convictions. To me, it seems clear that biblical religion possesses such a cohesiveness, even in its disparity of traditions; so clearly reflects the needs of its times; and, above all, so evidently represents a heightening and sharpening of traditional ideas, that it deserves to be viewed as revolutionary. The following discussion reflects this judgment.

The Development of Biblical Religion: From Prophecy to Text

Whether biblical religion marks a radical break with older Israelite-Judean religion, or only a new, heightened phase, its formative stimulus seems to have been in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BCE. The attempt of Jezebel to import the worship of Tyrian Baal, along with its rites and coterie of prophets, into Israel stirred the violent opposition of the prophets of the native deity YHVH. The leaders of the "YHVH-only" party, as Morton Smith called it, Elijah and his disciple Elisha, inspired a military coup against the northern monarchs, the Omrides. Elijah was filled with exclusive "zeal" *(kin'ah)* for God, an intolerance of other deities, that remained one of the hallmarks of biblical religion. The struggle with Baalism in the North continued into the 8th century, as evidenced by the activity of Hosea, who seems to have introduced a number of other key ideas, such

as the use of pungent sexual terminology to describe apostasy ("whoring after foreign gods"). Biblical religion was thus Northern in origin, which explains why, as a religious reference (as opposed to political and cultural), the name of the community that accepted biblical religion was to remain "Israel" long after the late 8th-century demise of the historical kingdom of Israel.

After the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the 8th century, this prophetically rooted, exclusive faith migrated south to Judah, perhaps already at the end of the 8th century, when it may have inspired the reforming efforts of King Hezekiah. By the late 7th century biblical religion had become consolidated into the Deuteronomic "movement," probably a loose confederation of priests, prophets and their disciples, and royal officials. King Josiah was induced, by the "finding" of a "Book of the Instruction" (*sefer* hatorah—probably a form of Deuteronomy) in the Temple, and by political motives (the weakening of Assyria) to undertake the great revolutionary "reform" of 621 BCE. The traditional high places were proscribed, worship was centralized in Jerusalem; images, stelae *(matzevot)*, wooden poles *('asherot)*, and the other paraphernalia of "idolatry" were destroyed (2 Kings chs 22–23); and the worship of the "Queen of Heaven" (Astarte) was forbidden (Jer. 44.18).

The reform, or revolution, lapsed after Josiah's ignominious death in battle, which could hardly have been interpreted by most contemporaries other than as divine judgment on his impiety in uprooting so many traditional forms of worship (see Jer. 44.15–19). But the ruling classes of Judah were soon exiled to Babylonia. The exile community of the 6th century BCE, centered near Nippur in southern Babylonia, was a crucible of religious activity: prophetic (Ezekiel, Second Isaiah) and historical (the work of the Deuteronomistic Historian, editor of the first edition of the Former Prophets, the historical books from Joshua to Kings). The basic theological ideas of the Deuteronomic and Priestly tradition began to take their classic written forms, as did the first editions of some of the prophetic writings.

The most active period in the establishment of biblical religion thus took place in the exile, and it was this religion that was transplanted back into the tiny Judean community of returned exiles in the late 6th and mid-5th centuries BCE. The first attempts at return were feeble and indecisive. The final reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (after 450 BCE) imposed the standards of developed biblical religion on the community, with the Torah, probably in more or less its present form, as the constitution. The development of biblical religion was therefore gradual, stretching from at least the late 9th or 8th to the 5th centuries. In its final form it marks an attempt to restore pre-exilic Judah, reinterpreted as a religious community of Israel, by restructuring old institutions and formulating new theological ideas projected back into a Mosaic age that was now viewed as uniquely authoritative. Contemporary prophecy was demoted and all but abolished in favor of the written documents that contained past revelation, so that biblical religion became a completely textual religion, requiring a body of approved interpreters, the scribes. Interpretation of the old revelation displaced the new revelations of contemporary prophets. The final form of biblical religion was supported by the Persian state, which may have stimulated the formation of the Torah, a compromise document of the two major ongoing traditions of biblical religion, the Deuteronomic-covenantal and the Priestly-cultic; both of which will now be briefly described.

Deuteronomic-covenantal Religion

The dominant stream of biblical religion is the Deuteronomic, or covenantal tradition. It conceives of the relationship between God and Israel as a legal form, a *berit* or *'edut*, a covenant, i.e., a contract, or treaty, made between God and the escapees from Egypt at Horeb (in other traditions, Sinai) with the mediation of the prophet Moses. The people had a direct

mass revelation of the divine Presence for the announcement of the Decalogue; the rest of the laws, the terms of the covenant, were transmitted privately to Moses on the mountain and read to the people later. The people agreed to the treaty freely, binding themselves and their descendants by an oath and covenant ceremony. By this treaty YHVH became Israel's God, with an obligation to give them the land of Canaan and otherwise protect them and provide for their needs; and Israel became God's people, with a permanent obligation to fulfill the divine commandments, the laws of the covenant. Horrendous curses are threatened for Israel's breach of the contract (see esp. Deut. 28.15–68). The Horeb/Sinai covenant is therefore conditional, unlike the covenant with David, which is strictly promissory. The most explicit and complete form of the covenant is in the book of Deuteronomy, whose core is a work of the 7th century BCE. Fragmentary and perhaps older covenantal traditions are found in Exod. chs 19–24 and 32–34.

It is now known that the conditional covenant between God and Israel generally follows the form of the treaty between a suzerain and his vassals, attested from the second millennium on. The covenant patterns of Deuteronomy have been shown to follow most closely later, Assyrian, treaty forms of the first millennium. Whether other covenant traditions can be shown to go back to earlier forms, attested among the Hittites of the late Bronze Age, is a matter of scholarly dispute. It is possible that covenant *(berit)* was first applied in the Judean royal tradition to the divine promise of protection to the House of David, as the unconditional, promissory type of covenant (itself based on ancient royal grants by kings to favored vassals). It was later said to have been prefigured by a similar "covenant," a promise to the national patriarch Abraham (Gen. chs 15, 17). Finally, the covenant idea, in its conditional form, was extended to the whole nation as a unique mass divine revelation. It is also possible that some traditions of the conditional type of national covenant precede the monarchy, and that the two types of covenant, conditional and unconditional, competed with each other already in Israelite-Judean religion. But the virtual absence of references to the Horeb/Sinai event in definitely old, especially poetic, texts, suggests the greater likelihood of the sequence described above.

Whatever its age and provenance, the covenant idea, as expressed in the Deuteronomic tradition, now dominates the Bible, not only the Torah, but also the work of the historical books, which have undergone a Deuteronomic edition, and some of the prophets, especially Hosea and, above all, Jeremiah (though, curiously, the covenant with Israel is hardly mentioned at all outside the Torah). The leading religious ideas of this tradition, in their classic Deuteronomic form, may be summarized as follows:

Deuteronomic religion is strictly monolatrous and probably monotheistic; i.e., not only insisting on the worship of one God, but positing the effective existence only of this deity. Other gods are mere breaths, nothings *(hevel)*; all idols are but material objects. Monotheism was an abstract idea difficult to express in ancient language, but it is palpable in Deuteronomic theology, if only by inference. As noted above, the abstract notion of monotheism is manifested in the strong Deuteronomic insistence that God be worshipped at only one shrine.

Deuteronomic religion places central stress on the name of God, and for this reason has been called by scholars a "name theology." The name (rather than the deity!) is said to "rest" *(shakan)* on the place God has chosen, i.e., the sole legitimate shrine (Jerusalem). It is a religion that implies divine transcendence. Direct divine contact with the world is strongly denied, except for the Horeb/Sinai revelation (and Deut. ch 4 seems to deny that God appeared on earth even then). Rather, God remains in heaven, from which He hears human prayer (1 Kings 8.30–49). This type of religion placed great stress on the word, both as name and prayer; and concomitantly on

the sense of hearing, as manifested not only in God's hearing of prayer, but also in human hearing of the words of the covenant and transmitting them to the young through teaching. The divine instruction *(torah)* must be the sole topic of human religious thought and meditation; it is Israel's true "wisdom" (Deut. 4.6). Deuteronomy places great emphasis on mind and inner thought. It contains a certain rationalizing, even rationalistic tendency, often offering reasons and explanations for the commandments of the covenant (Deut. 5.15; 15.18; etc.).

The focus on the oneness of God, shrine, and thought, extends also to emotion. Israel is enjoined not only to fear and obey, but also to love God, with total, singular inner devotion. The commandment to love, a seeming paradox, has its roots in the legal language of the ancient Near East, as an expression of volition, insuring that the terms of an agreement are entered into freely; for example, a vassal king may be commanded to "love" his overlord. But in Deuteronomy, loving God has become more than a legal metaphor. It is a total commitment, expressive of the emotion of *kin'ah*, which not only means "zeal," but also "jealousy." Stemming from this deep emotional bond between deity and individual (for Deuteronomic religion has a pronounced focus on the individual in the group) is a certain tendency toward intolerance and even totalitarianism, which has manifested itself often in later, biblically-based religions. But it is also true that covenant religion is the locus of an implicit doctrine of free will, because Israel is always confronted with the choice to obey or not obey, even if the promised reward for the former is life and the threatened punishment for the latter is death (see esp. Deut. 30.15–20).

Covenant faith is also a militant religion. It draws upon and reinterprets the holy war traditions of the ancient Near East and of Israelite-Judean religion, but focuses them not on any actual national foe but on what must be regarded, in Deuteronomy's day, as a quite fictitious enemy, the Canaanites, demanding their complete destruction (see esp. Deut. 20.16–18). Since the latter no longer existed as a group in the period in question, it is difficult to escape the impression that by "Canaanites" is meant an inner foe, Canaanizers, as it were, most likely adherents of older Israelite-Judean religion.

Covenant religion is a text religion, limiting itself to the written record of the contract between God and Israel. Creation themes are practically absent; reference to nature as "heaven and earth" is limited to invoking them as witnesses to the covenant, a literary survival of the list of gods in ancient treaties. Although it has prophetic roots, and reveres Moses as a unique super-prophet, Deuteronomic religion all but abolishes future prophetic revelation, lest new divine communications compete with the single authoritative written revelation at Horeb/Sinai (see below).

Deuteronomic religion has little interest in the cult, apart from insisting that it be limited to one spot. Otherwise, its major interest in ritual is in linking observance with the exodus, as it does with the Sabbath (Deut. 5.15), or in highlighting the Passover, by its nature already linked with the exodus. Passover seems to have played a key role in Deuteronomic-covenantal religion, since the "reforms" of Hezekiah and Josiah are described as being accompanied by special Passover ceremonies.

Priestly-cultic Religion

The Priestly tradition, the core of which is the mass of cultic legislation including the end of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and parts of Numbers, represents a type of religion that, like Deuteronomic faith, is also monotheistic and centered on one place of worship. It, too, presents itself as the result of revelation in a covenant, which it also terms *berit*, although, unlike Deuteronomic texts, it does not avoid adding the word "eternal" *(berit 'olam)*. It views the sacrificial cult as an unconditional and permanent establishment, like the Davidic covenant, and unlike the Sinai/Horeb

covenant, which was dependent on Israel's obedience and was therefore conditional. Like the Deuteronomic tradition, the Priestly tradition uses the term "rest" *(shakan)* to describe God's link to the shrine *(mishkan)*, but what "rests" on it is not the divine name, but the "glory" *(kavod)*. For this reason it is often said that the Priestly texts reflect a "glory" theology, in opposition to Deuteronomic "name" theology, expressive of an implied idea of divine immanence rather than transcendence. *Kavod* is the term already used in Israelite-Judean religion to describe the manifestation in theophany of the divine presence as storm cloud, lightning, earthquake, and, above all, as refulgent radiance. These ideas are rooted in the ancient Near East; a similar light surrounded the gods (a late relic of this belief is the halo around saints' heads in Christian art, prefigured by the light that streamed from Moses' face [Exod. 34.30]). But in Priestly thinking the ancient concepts and images have become more systematic. The divine glory, which was the main manifestation of the Sinai experience (Exod. 24.16–18) in the Priestly worldview, is said to have entered the completed Mosaic Tabernacle, model of future shrines, at its dedication (Exod. 40.34–35) and to return each year on the Day of Atonement to the Holy of Holies in the Temple, where it appeared over the cherub lid of the Ark (Lev. 16.2) (an alternative interpretation is that it was always immanent in the shrine but became visible only on that day). To be sure, it was seen only by the high priest on that day, but Priestly religion is nevertheless in general a religion of seeing, not hearing, like Deuteronomic religion. It is also a religion of touching, and smelling of the propitiating odor *(reaḥ niḥoaḥ)* of sacrifice and of the sweet savour of incense and spices. In other words, it is a religion of the physical, in which language, even prayer, plays little role, being quite absent from Torah texts reflecting this tradition. The contrast with Deuteronomic religion on this point could not be greater.

The Priestly tradition includes not only cultic texts dealing with sacrifice and ritual, but also the Priestly narrative source, responsible for the creation account of Gen. 1.1–2.4 and other key stories in Genesis and later in the Torah. If the narrative materials are viewed in conjunction with the cultic ones, it is possible to extrapolate an implicit Priestly theology that blends ritual and theology. The central ritual substance is the blood of sacrifice, and the central religious idea is atonement. The only explicit statement of the connection between the two is Lev. 17.11, where it is said that the blood of sacrifice effects atonement for the lives of Israelites. The underlying theology is not explained, since, unlike Deuteronomy, the Priestly authors eschew explanation and rationalization; but in the preceding chapter, Lev. ch 16, it is said that the high priest is to attain atonement for Israel by entering the Holy of Holies and sprinkling sacrificial blood before the divine presence. The link between atonement and blood is therefore quite firm. According to another Priestly text, Gen. ch 9, avoiding consumption of blood is part of a complex of themes, in which the eating of the meat of animals is presented in the context of a divine concession to inherent human sinfulness. But the preceding chapter (Gen. ch 8) contains an eternal divine promise never to allow human sin to lead to another catastrophic flood. It may perhaps be extrapolated that blood is a reminder to God both of human sin and of His promise to forgive. Perhaps it is safer to say that the link between sacrificial blood and forgiveness for sins is a mystery, because the Priestly tradition cultivates mystery and a sense of the immanently numinous. The Priestly complex of blood and atonement was to have a great effect on Christian theology. After the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis stated that prayer, rather than blood, attains forgiveness for Israel; this reflects a melding of Deuteronomic and Priestly worldviews.

Priestly religion has reinterpreted the old cult of Israelite-Judean religion to focus less on the ancient whole, communal, and thank offerings *('olah, shelem, todah)*, than on the ex-

piatory sacrifices, the "sin offering" (*ḥata't*) (better translated "purification offering") and "trespass offering" ("guilt offering") (*'asham*). Old festivals were reinterpreted, the ancient probable New Year, as noted above, all but disappearing in the process.

The Priestly tradition also continues the ancient insistence that worshippers be morally as well as ritually pure. It has been suggested that some psalms, especially Pss. 15 and 24, reflect ancient "entrance liturgies," declarations of moral purity pilgrims were obliged to make before they could enter the sacred precincts of the shrine. The moral aspect finds expression in the Priestly tradition of later biblical religion primarily in the "Holiness Collection" (Lev. chs 17–26), especially in Lev ch 19 (the command to "love thy neighbor as thyself" comes from Lev. 19.18). In these chapters, worshippers are enjoined to be "holy as the LORD, your God is holy." To the developed Priestly tradition holiness means not just the numinous "other," or moral perfection, but physical and spiritual separation from the impure: clean from unclean, sinner from wicked, Israel from the nations. Gen. ch 1 represents creation itself as a series of separations and distinctions by means of which primeval chaos became ordered. Similarly, the Temple consists of a complex of precincts of increasing holiness. This reclusive, segregating notion of the holy is derived from ancient Near Eastern, ultimately mythically rooted models, like much of Priestly thinking. But in its final form this definition of holiness as separation and exclusion fits especially well with the milieu of postexilic Judah in the 5th century BCE, in which, as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah show, separation from other groups was the key issue. Gone is the broad view of holiness as the divine presence that fills the whole earth (Isa. 6.3). Also reflecting postexilic circumstances is the ritual prominence in the Priestly codes of the Sabbath as a weekly day of rest memorializing creation, and the rite of circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, distinguishing Jews from their neighbors.

Other Traditions of Biblical Religion

The Liturgical Tradition

As noted above, the Deuteronomic tradition exalts prayer (though mainly in the deuteronomistic historical books of Former Prophets), while the Priestly tradition seems to all but ignore it (the high priest's confession on the Day of Atonement is a notable exception). Prose prayer plays a prominent role in the historical works edited by the Deuteronomic school, as well as in the later book of Chronicles. Poetic prayer is mainly found in the book of Psalms, the history and development of which is very complex and poorly understood. Chronicles states that liturgical pieces, such as hymns and petitions, were composed by Levitical guilds in Second Temple times (1 Chron. chs 15–16). This may also have been true in earlier periods as well, but the only liturgical situation that can definitely be reconstructed for Israelite-Judean religion is the one associated with the large genre of the "petitions of the individual." A worshipper in distress vowed to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving (*todah*) if rescued by God, and to declare God's praise to those assembled for the communal sacrificial meal. There is evidence that in some cases the prayer and praise would be written down, sometimes on a stele. This form of prayer is also attested elsewhere in the ancient Near East, but is most highly developed in the book of Psalms. Doubtless the cult of Israelite-Judean religion included hymns to the deity, of which old psalms like Pss. 29 and 68 may be examples. Prayers were also offered at the Jerusalem Temple on behalf of the king, of which the small number of "royal psalms" are probable survivors (Pss. 20, 21, 45, 72, 89).

The canonical book of Psalms reflects biblical religion and was collected in the postexilic period of the 5th and 4th centuries. Many psalms are assigned pseudepigraphically to David, others to Levitical figures such as Asaph, Ethan, and Korah. Many are unascribed. The work is divided into five "books," likely on the model of the Torah. The

old traditions of Israelite-Judean prayer have been reinterpreted and reworked to supply models of approved monotheistic piety. Prayers are addressed only to YHVH; there is no mention of the mediating angelic figures that seem to have played a role in "popular" religion (Job 33.23; Ps. 91.11). Numerous genres are represented: petitions of the individual (the largest group), communal petitions and complaints, historical hymns, nature hymns, "enthronement psalms" (describing God as king), "royal psalms" (praise and petition for the Davidic king), "Zion psalms" (hymns about Jerusalem and the Temple mountain), "songs of ascent" (for pilgrimages), wisdom and Torah psalms. There is a scholarly debate about the extent to which the canonical psalms represent actual liturgical pieces written for and used in the cult. Opinions range from the view that practically all of the psalms, except for wisdom and Torah, were used in the cult, to the view that almost all psalms have been freed from their cultic roots and have become "spiritualized" literary expressions of a dominantly individual, Temple-focused piety. There is little doubt the "royal psalms" are intended by the editors to be taken eschatologically, as referring to the future messianic (not, as they originally did, the current Davidic) king. It is likely that the other genres had many functions; as is often the case with liturgical texts, actual usage and inner meaning are not always apparent from the bare text, because the same words can be applied to many, and ever-changing, circumstances. This fact, though inconvenient for scholarship, no doubt partially accounts for the great popularity of the book of Psalms to this day.

Prophetic Tradition in Biblical Religion

The role of prophets in Israelite-Judean religion was sketched above, as well as the prophetic background to the development of biblical religion, specifically, the Deuteronomic-covenantal tradition. Strangely enough, however, biblical religion has a divided attitude toward the phenomenon of prophecy. On the one hand, prophecy was exalted in the figure of Moses, and revelation, by origin a purely prophetic phenomenon and limited to individuals, was made a constitutive national experience at Horeb/Sinai, albeit limited to that one occurence. On the other hand, prophecy as a living phenomenon was discouraged. Future prophets had to prove they were "true" and not "false" by producing prophecies that came true before their messages would be heeded (Deut. 18.21), a tautologous condition that effectively abolished prophecy as a living institution after the 5th century BCE, at least in "official" religion. No future revelation could compete with Moses or amend what he had said.

The books of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve), which purport to be a record of the great literary prophets of the past, were composed and edited in such a way that the viewpoint of developed biblical religion was dominant. The ecstatic aspect of the prophetic experience was downplayed, and visions were usually reported in some detail only for the inaugural of the prophet. Otherwise, the visual aspect, while definitely present, is secondary to the auditory. This produces the impression that the prophets were motivated by some vague kind of "inspiration" akin to that experienced by artists or writers, and that they were mainly preachers of morality, rather than the strange, antisocial, conflicted, and—if we can judge from the "Confessions" of Jeremiah—doubt-tortured individuals they often were. Jeremiah rails against his prophetic mission, but feels an irresistible inner compulsion ("a burning fire imprisoned within my bones, which I struggle to contain but cannot") to deliver God's words (Jer. 20.9). Biblical religion has flattened the prophets (a process continued by later tradition) but could not obliterate all evidence of their powerful personalities.

The Latter Prophets were also edited with much interpolation of later tradition, so that it is often difficult to tell in a book like Isaiah which speeches go back to the prophet himself (chs 24–27, 40–66 are definitely non-

Isaianic). Many of the later additions are eschatological and messianic. Eschatology, "the doctrine of the end," is the prophetic tradition that expresses hopes for the coming of an era of perfect peace, often brought about by a messianic ruler. The ancient Near Eastern background seems to have been in a type of oracle that predicted the coming of such a ruler after a time of troubles and disorder. The royal tradition of Judah (and perhaps even of Northern Israel) may already have contained such visions of a future king, but the attestations of messianism are in the literary prophets, especially Isaiah of Jerusalem, who seems to have been the first to introduce eschatology in a major way. The oracles in Isaiah from chs 7–11 predict the birth of several royal or royal-like children. The paradigmatic oracle is Isa. ch 11, which describes the reign of the future king in terms of a return to paradise. Peace will reign over the whole earth; even predatory animals will lose their urge to harm. Edenic themes dominate the developing messianic tradition in the later prophets, so that messianic oracles have been said to express an underlying belief in the cyclical, or at least circular nature of history, reflected in the dictum that "the end of time will be like the beginning of time" (Hermann Gunkel, the great German biblical scholar active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries). The messianic age will witness the submission of the nations to Israel, its king and its God, the cessation of war, the exaltation of the Temple on Mount Zion, and so on. The eschatological tradition became the focus of the hopes of an exiled and subjected people. This accounts for its popularity after the exile, and the fact that the prophetic books were edited with many eschatological additions. Contemporary prophecy after the 5th century may have been viewed as dangerous, but the prophets of the past, now made into canonical texts, could be studied for their glowing predictions, actual or interpolated, of the reversal of Israel's lowly state among the nations. Some scholars have tried to find a social milieu for the development of messianism, and posited an opposition in the postexilic period between conservative and privileged Priestly circles, who eschewed messianic enthusiasm, and oppressed circles of "visionaries," who cultivated it as a form of protest. In fact, messianism is entirely absent from the Torah, the central document of postexilic official religion; but it is uncertain that one is justified in positing a societal opposition of the type just described to explain the cultivation of messianic themes. Even the rich can long for the coming of the messiah.

By the 3rd to 2nd centuries BCE eschatology had developed into apocalyptic (a Greek term meaning "to uncover"), a form of literature combining many strands of tradition. The only representative of apocalyptic in the Bible is Dan. chs 7–12, but it was the subject of a vast literature from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, eventually becoming a Christian genre. The Dead Sea community is held by most scholars to have been the Essenes, an apocalyptic sect; and Christianity grew from apocalyptic roots as well. Apocalyptic differs from earlier prophetic eschatology in being deterministic, hermetic, and systematic; it typically also uses an intermediary angelic figure as a conduit for its revelations. The pattern of history was fixed by God at creation; free will is therefore an illusion. A great crisis, in the form of the persecution of the righteous, viewed as a small group of the faithful who are "in the know" and who can interpret the meaning of the strange and wild imagery that fills apocalyptic texts, will trigger divine intervention and the final cosmic battle between good and evil, waged on an earthly and angelic plane. The holy war traditions of the ancient world find their apotheosis in Armageddon. Apocalyptic literature has a definite concept of an afterlife, linked to reward and punishment, unlike biblical religion: The dead will be resurrected on the Day of Judgment, some for eternal punishment, others for eternal bliss in paradise. The apocalyptic concept of resurrection and judgment was accepted by the Rabbis and by Christians as a dogma.

The Wisdom Tradition

The wisdom tradition is found in many places in the Bible, but it especially dominates the Writings, not only "proper" wisdom books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, but also some psalms (1, 19, 37, 119, etc.) and other texts. Wisdom *(hokhmah)* is the term used to describe the intellectual and educational tradition of the ancient Near East, the province of scribal schools, teachers and students, but also elders, wise fathers and mothers. Wisdom was a determinedly international and humanistic tradition. The wise of all nations communicated with each other; genres, themes, and even language crossed boundaries freely. Parts of the book of Proverbs are virtually translations of an Egyptian work of wisdom; and biblical wisdom texts are replete with themes and language drawn from foreign wise men. The themes of traditional wisdom were the training of the young, expressed in maxims for correct living that would produce prosperity and esteem, so called "practical wisdom." But there also was so-called "speculative wisdom," which dealt with philosophical and religious issues, above all the problem of suffering and theodicy, the justifying of the ways of God: Why do the righteous often suffer and the wicked prosper? There are Babylonian and Egyptian "Jobs" as well as the biblical figure; and even the latter, in consonance with the international focus of wisdom, is portrayed not as an Israelite but as an Aramean from Uz. Wisdom was also a tradition interested in creation, in the workings of nature. Natural imagery abounds in wisdom texts, like proverbs and fables; and Solomon is said to have delivered parables about plants, animals, fish, and trees (1 Kings 5.13).

Many scholars hold that there was a kind of incipient natural philosophy in the ancient world shared also by Israel. The world was created by wisdom, and reflects an underlying unity of natural and moral orders, called *ma'at*, "truth," in Egypt, *mesharum*, "right," in Mesopotamia, and by various terms in Israel, among them *'emet*, "stability, truth," and *tzedek*, "righteousness, order." In Israel, it was believed that the world was created by God with the help of wisdom (Job ch 28, Prov. ch 8), so that His plan is manifested in the order of the cosmos.

Up to the 7th century the wisdom tradition seems to have shown little interest in the particular religious traditions of Israel-Judah (though the prophets make increasing use of wisdom themes, especially Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, and Ezekiel); this explains the absence of references to cultic worship and to covenant in wisdom books. The development of full biblical religion, in the form of the Deuteronomic-covenantal complex, created a crisis of the wise. Deuteronomy rejects wisdom that does not concern itself with revelation and covenantal law. In the exile and afterwards, some of the wise began to accommodate their views to biblical religion, in varying degrees. Some refused all but superficial adherence to the new order. Although it is a very late book, Ecclesiastes remains almost wholly on the level of traditional old wisdom, except for the last verses (probably added by an editor). The book shows no concern for covenant religion and in its gentle cynicism is close to the ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition (especially in regard to its *carpe diem* philosophy) and also to contemporary Epicurean philosophy.

But much of wisdom compromised with biblical religion by combining themes of traditional wisdom with the new faith. A strange deterministic theology of retribution developed that dominates much of Proverbs, some Psalms (especially 37) and, most strikingly, the speeches of Job's "friends": The righteous are always rewarded, the wicked always punished. Combined with this belief in strict reward and punishment was a doctrine of absolute cause and effect, derived from the nature interest of old wisdom, but now distorted into this new deterministic theology. Since only the wicked suffer, Job's friends say, Job must have committed some crime since he is clearly suffering. This doctrine is really a

hybrid wisdom-covenantal faith, though it avoids explicit mention of covenant and presents itself as a form of natural law.

The greatest rebel against this deterministic and pitiless pseudo-piety was the author of Job, who rejects the arguments of the friends. Job is a radical rebel, who refuses to admit he is being punished for sin. With astounding hubris he demands that God appear to justify His ways. Job forces the deity to intervene to save His reputation. In a set of great speeches (Job chs 38–41), some of the most magnificent poetry of the Bible, God challenges Job to explain the works of creation. The problem with the divine "answer" is that God does not seem to address Job's challenge that He must explain why He is making Job suffer. Interpretations of the meaning of the book are numerous. Some maintain that God is simply overwhelming Job by confronting him with his human ignorance of the ways of God. Who are you to challenge the deity? A more modern reading holds that God is confirming the lack of congruence between natural and moral realms, a total rejection of traditional wisdom philosophy. A more positive interpretation is that God, even as He reminds Job of his human weakness, rouses him to awe and wonder at the greatness of nature, so that human suffering, even Job's, sinks into relative insignificance, at least temporarily. Probably the meaning of the book, like the meaning of *Hamlet* or any great work of literature, will always remain a riddle. Eventually wisdom's focus on nature gave way entirely to a focus on covenant, with results we see in the "Torah psalms," of which Ps. 119 is the longest, if not the most stirring, example.

Conclusions and Synthesis

Can one summarize biblical religion in a way that will organize its disparate traditions? The Bible is the most unsystematic of sacred texts, representing 1,000 years of textual development from different areas and social and religious groups. The several traditions of biblical religion we have listed, and the added complication of their superimposition on an earlier, and in many ways quite different, stage and type of religion, are so complex and confusing that one despairs of finding meaning in the whole, rather than in the parts. The historical discipline of source criticism has isolated the traditions and strands, without explaining their presence combined in the same work, often next to each other, in a way that seems intended to bewilder the reader. The traditional Jewish strategy in dealing with the multifariousness of the Bible is midrash, with its joyously insouciant ability to connect both the similar and the contradictory with a leap of imagination. However, historical scholarship, more limited in its agility than midrash, seems to be faced with two stark choices: to renounce interpretation of the whole and consider only the parts; or, conversely, to overlook the diversity and deal only with the whole on the canonical level. Indeed, canonical criticism, which views the Bible in the light of the communities that regard it as their Scripture, is one of the most important hermeneutical developments of recent years.

Yet there is a middle way: to recognize in the multiplicity of viewpoints not the result of incompetent editing, but the intent to express new religious insights in a culture that had as yet developed no theological, philosophical language adequate to describe them—a culture that, in addition, was conscientious about preserving old texts and traditions. In place of a harmonized, systematized theology, the Bible presents conflicting traditions, often next to each other: two creation narratives in Gen. chs 1–3; two forms of covenant tradition in the Torah, Deuteronomic and Priestly; two forms of prophetic speech, excoriating *riv* and comforting eschatology, and so on. Since biblical religion is textual, the believer is also necessarily a reader and an interpreter. Therefore a literary approach, a reading of God, as it were, may be preferable to a systematic theological approach that seeks to reconcile contradictions. Sympathy, not sophistry or scholasticism is required. The Bible must be read

with the same freedom one has in all literary, especially poetic, interpretation, with concern for language and nuance, with awareness of the device of the juxtaposition of opposites, with delight in the kind of ambiguities that give texts deeper meaning. The later Rabbis recognized this freedom in midrash, and even in matters of halakhic disagreement sometimes allowed that both opinions were the "words of the Living God," a God made living precisely by the play of debate.

Indeed, biblical religion seems to go out of its way to cultivate and display disunity, to express religious ideas in terms of paired themes in tension, even opposition. For example, it can speak of God in one verse in a way that emphasizes the austere transcendence of the Deity; in the next verse it can use the most earthy and explicit anthropomorphism. The Bible is the least ecclesiastical, scholastic, and dogmatic of texts. As a transitional form of religion, biblical traditions had the luxury not to systematize, which is precisely what made the Bible the fertile ground from which its daughter religions could grow.

Yet there is an underlying unity in the varying traditions: the development of the characteristically biblical notion of faith in God. Faith is a much more complex idea than it is commonly held to be, so accustomed are we to speaking of "simple" faith. In fact it is a very complicated concept, the result of a long process of development. Its roots are probably in the ancient institution of holy war. Warriors were commanded to have confidence in God's protection, not to fear or let their hearts become weak (Deut. 20.3). This idea of trust or confidence in God's protection in battle did not become the truly biblical concept of faith until it was taken over by prophecy, from which it passed into the Deuteronomic-covenantal tradition and from thence into the other major traditions of biblical religion. Diagnostic of the idea of faith in its biblical form is that it has not only a primary object, God, but also a secondary one, the prophet. Moreover, the trust it demands is total and unconditional. This is the sort of faith Isaiah demanded of King Ahaz (Isa. 7.9): "If you do not have faith you will not be established!" (The Hebrew is a play on words, and says literally, "If you do not display firmness you will not be made firm.") The faith demanded here is not only that God will rescue Judah in a time of grave peril, but that Ahaz must also believe Isaiah is a true, not a false prophet. The sign of Immanuel (Isa. 7.14–17) that Isaiah gives Ahaz is unique, a test rather than a confirmation of confidence. Biblical faith involves absolute trust in the prophet as well as in God. This was later transmuted into faith in the authenticity of the textual record of past revelation. This mediated type of faith is the essential uniting core of all forms and all major traditions of biblical religion, and the unique contribution of biblical religion to world religion.

Faith, in the sense just described, pervades the whole Bible. Genesis has been edited to represent a struggle for faith on the part of the patriarchs, especially Abraham, who proves his faith only with the binding of Isaac. The narratives of the rest of the Torah record the people's struggle to maintain absolute trust in God, a test they repeatedly fail, despite the prevalence of overwhelming miracles. The prophets wrestle with faith constantly, especially with faith in the fact that they themselves are true and not deluded false prophets. Job, whatever the exact meaning of the book, certainly implies faith in divine Providence, despite all evidence to the contrary. The Psalms, especially the petitions of the individual, represent the struggle for firm, if not unquestioning, conviction despite suffering, doubts, and inner weakness. This biblical faith has as its locus a new kind of religious individual, the believing self, united in its devotion to the Deity. The tension between the faith-filled self, its own doubts, and the new type of community of believers posited by biblical religion as the true "Israel," is what gives the Bible its paradoxical unity in disparity, and its great religious power.

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