The operating assumption of this book is that biblical literature is ideological, and that all of the genres and sub-genres constituting the biblical canon—such as historiography, including its stories, prophecies, hymns and psalms, law, and wisdom literature, and even its sub-genres, such as the varied types of lists, proverbs, speeches, and the like—appear there because in one way or another they serve ideological needs. A further working assumption is that this canon is by its nature polyphonic, and that the multiplicity of voices found therein is a function of the circumstances of its composition and shaping. Hence, any attempt to uncover harmony among the totality of the texts involves a forced reading of the texts, which ought to be exchanged for listening to the various voices and the polemics that they represent.

The book is composed of three parts:

The first part, which constitutes the introduction to the subject, consists of two chapters. In the first chapter, I describe the use of polemics as one of the most striking characteristics of biblical literature. To this end, I discuss the question of the nature of a polemical text, and why not every text bringing different information or a different opinion than those existing in another text is to be considered polemical. I likewise show that many polemics are described as relating to a concrete reality, a factor that explains their contribution to the understanding of that reality and their own place in its shaping. On the other hand, I emphasize the fact that in most cases biblical literature does not present systematic discussions, and that the discovery of different positions in a polemic may be done in diverse ways, including: the existence of formulations that create a difficulty in their immediate context, by comparison of various versions, etc. The end of this chapter raises the pluralistic nature of biblical editing, which deliberately left the various polemics in place and did not see fit to censor or to lend to the texts a uniform character. I likewise explain my preference to deal with polemics arising out of the narrative genre, which developed sophisticated means of transmitting its messages.

In the second chapter I discuss explicit and implicit polemics, so
as to define more sharply the phenomenon of the hidden polemic. In writing this chapter, I often felt that things are well-known and familiar. Nevertheless, precisely because of the accepted assumption that biblical narrative does not openly reveal its messages, I saw fit to bring a number of examples that represent the method of the overt polemic, its use of indirect techniques, as well as the existence of indirect polemics. My focus upon the latter is important for understanding the phenomenon of hidden polemics and the differences between it and indirect polemics.

The second part, which constitutes the main body and central portion of the book, is devoted to the phenomenon of hidden polemic as such. This part contains four chapters, in which I select polemics dealing with various aspects of the world of faith and beliefs found in biblical literature, elucidating the techniques used to conceal them and to make the sensitive reader aware of their covert presence. I also attempt to explain the reasons for their concealment.

The third and final section of the book sheds light upon an additional phenomenon: namely, that of seemingly hidden polemics—i.e., stories which bear many of the characteristics of the hidden polemic, but in which these are used, not for purposes of concealment, but for rhetorical reasons. To me, the existence of this type of polemics is further proof for the existence of such a technique as hidden polemics and the varied manners of its use.

Reflection on biblical literature as polemical, whose meanings are not unequivocal, and which has an interest in emphasizing the existence of controversy and of a multiplicity of views, suggests a certain line of continuity between biblical literature and the literature of the Oral Torah which came in its wake. The latter developed and perfected the culture of polemic controversy and meeting of opinions to the point of turning argumentation into a central matter in its own right, of no less importance than the legal decision that comes in its wake. It seems to me that the beginning of this phenomenon lies in the multiplicity and preservation of polemics in biblical literature.