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

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

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

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

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

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

LIFE-SETTNGS

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

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


4 Overviews of research offer, e.g. Martin J. Buss, Form-Criticism; Henning Graf Reventlow, Gebet; Hans-Peter Müller, “Formgeschichte/Formenkritik I,” TRE 11.271 – 285.