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 v. in a way that emphasizes the austere transcendence of the Deity; in the next v. 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 Heb 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. Gen. 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 Ps., 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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