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Introduction to the Literary Approach:
The Monotheism of Old Testament Narrative

1. Introduction

Today's conference aims at bringing out in a special way the *literary* dimension of Old Testament texts. This approach has been severely neglected and overlooked in theology - especially in Germany and continental Europe - to the present day. This is surprising, since the conversation between theology and literary science in the sense of interdisciplinary exchange has been in progress internationally for several decades, thus contributing to mutual cross-fertilization. On this, G. Langenhorst aptly observes:

> 'The Bible as Literature' – this academic discipline of dialogue is in England, America and Israel for 35 years an independent and highly fertile research field. Which perspectives can be gained if the Bible is primarily considered as a work of world literature and with the hermeneutical and methodological processes of literary science - this dual perspective is in the center there.[1]

The "literary dimension" means that the Old Testament is literature, written by different authors in different ways. We assume that the authors have written on behalf of God, as he has revealed himself to them, so it is important not only WHAT they have written, but also HOW they wrote it.[2] Thus, the question concerning the historical context of the texts of the Old Testament is inseparably linked with the question of the literary character of the texts. Accordingly, the internationally well-known Old Testament scholar J. Goldingay remarks in his book "*Models for Interpretation of Scripture*", as he refers to our lecturer today:

> It is not mere chance that most biblical narratives have historical concerns as well as literary features. They are not novels or short stories, even though they share the literary and rhetorical form of novels or short stories. Thus Sternberg describes Hebrew narratives as combining ideology, historiography, and aesthetics – they aim to inculcate a worldview and to relate history, but they use the conventions of art to do so. They are more than history, not less than history. That makes both historical and literary approaches to interpretation appropriate to them.[3]

This is because exactly in the manner HOW the various authors have written the books of the Old Testament, the exact message is expressed, and the accent with which they would have understood their texts. They did not

just write their texts unintentionally, but they were very aware about how they would write and shape their texts. On this again Goldingay aptly notes in his recently published new book, *Key Questions about Biblical interpretation: Old Testament Answers*:

> With the biblical narrative in general, it is important both that it relates to events that actually happened and that it is not a mere chronicle of happenings, but more than that; it is a narrative that brings out a message in the story and shows how it relates to its hearers.[4]

To explore this belongs to the field of *literary history* of the Old Testament,[5] however, from an international perspective it is still far removed from a unified scientific approach.[6]

This, of course, applies particularly to the so-called *narrative texts*. As presented last year, we see in the salvation history of God with man the three related dimensions of revelation, experience, and documentation, as it becomes visible in the Biblical narrative texts.[7] This distinction, however, is not made at least in the American Christian literary science. Especially the level of "story" is dealt with, without emphasizing the factual basis of the revelation of God. Thus the well-known literary scientist L. Ryken notes in his article "Reading the Bible as Literature" regarding his hermeneutical approach:

> A crucial principle of interpretation thus needs to be established at the outset: meaning is communicated *through form*, starting with the very words of a text but reaching beyond that to considerations of literary genre and style. We cannot properly speak about the theological or moral content of a story or poem (for example) without first interacting with the story or poem. ... Any piece of writing needs to be interpreted in terms of the kind of writing that it is. The Bible is a literary book in which theology and history are usually embodied in literary forms. Those forms include genres, the incarnation of human experience in concrete form, stylistic and rhetorical techniques, and artistry.[8]

This factor of the "incarnation of human experience", however, is too unspecific and undifferentiated to adequately understand the Biblical-semitic revelation structure of the Old Testament narrative texts. Therefore this American literary approach, falls short of the claim of the Biblical texts of the Old and New Testaments.[9] Because the documentation of the tradition does not provide an un-historical narrative, but the documentation of facts, i.e. a "testimony of the time". (see graphic on p 35).

Also in the German literary science this unique quality of Biblical revelation is not adequately appreciated. Thus C. Hardmeier describes the framework, the limits and the tasks of Biblical literary science,[10] including the structural signals of narrative texts. However, he does not mention the differentiation of revelation – experience – documentation. However, he emphasizes the hermeneutical significance of Biblical texts for the present.[11]

This insight into the contemporary task of interpreting the Bible leads us to our second consideration:

2. The documentation of the actions of God: Why the report is important for understanding

The foundational question is why the Biblical text - to a very large extent - is given in the form of reports. From this follows the further question: Why is the narrative context of these reports important? And finally we must ask: What does the written form mean for the world of human experience?

This question becomes even more important in the inter-religious context at the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium.[12] If we look at different religions, we see in Islam that the Qur'an provides a collection of individual proverbs, but very few narrative contexts within its texts. As an example, let's look at the story of David.[13] In relation to *David*, there are several verses in Sura 38 on him.[14] In Sura 38,16 the people of Mecca say of him:

> Our Lord, give us our book quickly, yes, even before the day of reckoning.

Then, in verse 17, David is mentioned, but without an introduction of his person ("Dawud"). Similarly, David is mentioned in verses 22-25, including an implied reference to his royal position, especially in his dialogue with two opponents. In fact, these two enemies express their praise to David in verse 26:

> O Dawud, we have made you a ruler on earth. Therefore, you may judge between people according to the truth and do not follow your inclination so that it may not make you stray from the path of Allah …[15]

The Biblical-semitic World View

REVELATION
(Meta-Physics)

EXPERIENCE (Physics)

TRADITION (Testimony, Narrative)
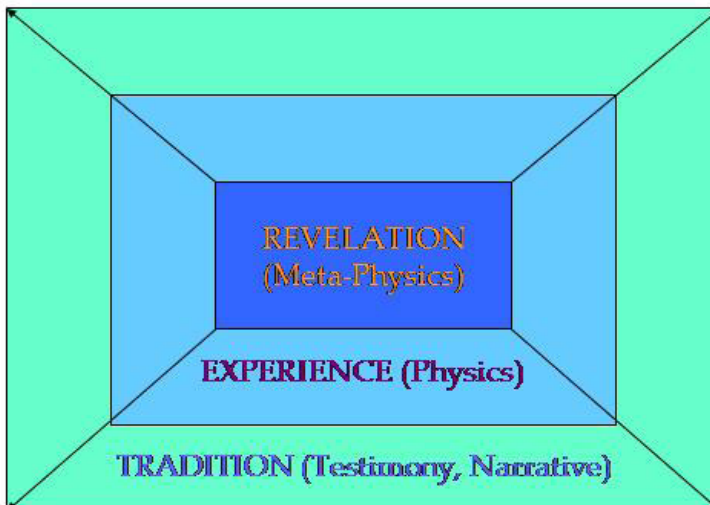
So we see here a certain resemblance to David's royal position in the Old Testament, but without a larger narrative context, regarding the development of his personality, his calling and his office. This means, for example, that the entire report of the rise of David to the royal power and the corresponding demise of the kingdom of Saul, as we see it in the narrative of 1 Samuel 9-31, is completely missing.[16] This is illustrated by the picture below:

In Hinduism, the Bhagavad-Gita also offers a collection of individual proverbs and poems, however, without developing a salvation-historical narrative structure with continuous actions in certain places at certain times.[17] As differentiated A. Michaels, the religious literature of Hinduism includes the following genres:

Vedic Sanskrit literature, including texts of sacrificial rituals, domestic rituals, law and custom.[18] At most, mythological, but not salvation-historical narrative structures can be found.[19]

In Buddhism,[20] there are writings of short stories and there are other literary genres such as proverbs, axioms, aphorisms, fragments etc.[21]

Despite the diversity of these literary forms, there is no such corresponding narrative of a salvation history like in the Old Testament. Therefore, the reports of the Biblical texts of the Old and New Testaments provide a form of communication that is not self-evident, but - on the contrary - is a privilege, therefore its significance must be worked out in a conscious way.

The Rise of David and the Demise of Saul

1 Samuel 9 - 31

Saul

ROYAL THRONE

David

DEATH
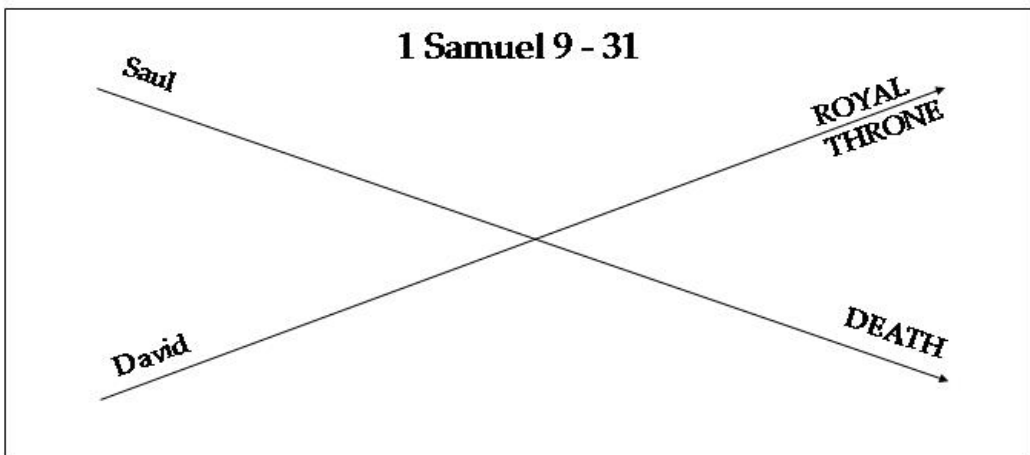
3. What does the documentation of Scripture mean for the world of human experience?

The foundational problem facing the world of human experience is that man must be connected to the continuum of time and space, which surrounds and influences him. This is the *sociological* dimension of our question. The basic function of Holy Scripture for the world of human experience is that it connects him with the eternal God who is above and independent of time and space. In this context, Scripture becomes the means of information, which documents and interprets the revelation of God to man. Thus Scripture enables the human person to make a value judgment about his personal existence as well as the existence of his family, society and nation with regard to the eternal God. The revelation of God creates a *chain of facts*, by which man is sociologically affected in time and space. This is illustrated by the picture below:

By the documentation of the experiences of the revealed actions of God, the perception of man is shifted from dependence on time and space to the infinite possibilities of the saving actions of God, which indeed have *eternal* quality. This is Holy Scripture in the understanding of the psalmist, when he says in Psalm 19:9 (see also Ps 111:4,6): "The fear of the LORD is pure, it remains forever." This means that through obedience to the commandments of the Lord, which is "fear", the man who observes the word of God, obtains eternal benefits.[22] Therefore it is necessary to leave the human point of view and see the perspective of God as it is documented in

The Chain of Facts of God's Revelation
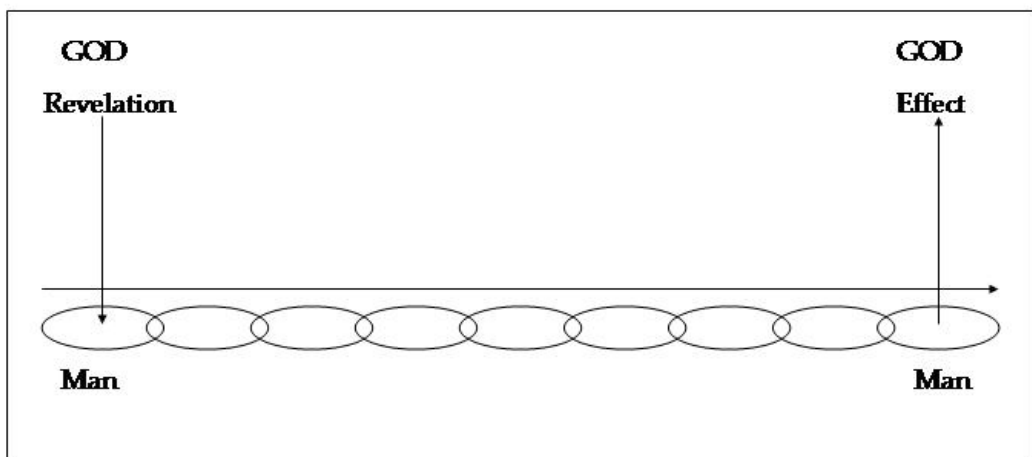
his commandments and reports of his actions.[23] In this sense, M. Sternberg will illuminate the following text (1 Kings 1-2) from a literary point of view.

ENDNOTES

[1] Langenhorst, Georg. Review of: Hans-Peter Schmidt/Daniel Weidner (Hg.): *Bibel als Literatur* (Paderborn: Fink 2008). Augsburg, Dezember 2008. - www.theologie-und-literatur.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Theologie_und_Literatur/Rezension_Bibel_als_Literatur.pdf; Schmidt and Weidner devote a chapter to the approach of Meir Sternberg: „Fiktion, Wissen und ‚ganze Wahrheit' (pp. 57-82), which he developed in his groundbreaking study, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*: Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[2] For in introduction to the literary dimension of Biblical texts, cf. Ryken, Leland. *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Longman, Tremper III. "Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation", in: *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997): 91-192; Ryken, Leland. "Bible as Literature", in: *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. David S. Dockery et al. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994): 55-72; Gabel, John B.; Wheeler, Charles B. et al. *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction.* Fifth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Crain, Jeanie C. *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); McConnell, Frank (ed.). *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Norton, David. *A History of the Bible as Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Gunn, David M.; Fewell, Danna Nolan. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Fewell, Danna Nolan (ed.). *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992).

[3] Goldingay, John. "Scripture as Witnessing Tradition: Interpreting Narrative", *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 32.

[4] Goldingay, John. *Key Questions about Biblical Interpretation: Old Testament Answers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), pp. 163-164.

[5] For an introduction, cf. Utzschneider, Helmut. „Literaturgeschichte / Literaturgeschichtsschreibung. II. Altes Testament", *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4. Aufl., Band 5 (Tübingen: Mohr, 2002), pp. 405-408.

[6] The OT scholar K. Schmid aptly remarks: „Schließlich ist die Vermittlung der unterschiedlichen internationalen akademischen Kulturen in der Bibelwissenschaft nach wie vor ein Desiderat. Namentlich im Bereich einleitungswissenschaftlicher Bestimmungen, die für den Entwurf einer Literaturgeschichte von entscheidender Bedeutung sind, divergieren die Forschungen in Europa, Nordamerika und Israel bezüglich Voraussetzungen, Methoden und Resultaten in einem solchen Maße, dass es wenig sinnvoll erscheint, sich mit dem *status quo* der gegenseitig informierten Beziehungslosigkeit zu bescheiden. Gerade hier könnte aber das Verfolgen von dezidiert literaturgeschichtlichen Fragestellungen gegenseitige Annäherungen und Aufklärungsprozesse mit sich bringen, die sich auch in anderen Teildisziplinen der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft gewinnbringend auswirken könnten." - Schmid, Konrad. „Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments. Aufgaben, Stand, Problemfelder und Perspektiven", *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 136 (2011): 262.

Er beobachtet jedoch eine beginnende Umsetzung des literaturgeschichtlichen Ansatzes speziell in Deutschland: „Diese Aufgabe hat sich auch institutionell in den Theologischen Fakultäten im deutschen Sprachraum festgesetzt. Eine ganze Reihe von Lehrstühlen im Bereich des Alten Testaments trägt als genauere Spezifizierung den Begriff der ‚Literaturgeschichte' in ihrer Bezeichnung (z.B. Berlin, Greifswald, Kiel, Tübingen). … Blickt man allerdings in die angebotenen Curricula, so wird die traditionelle Einleitungsvorlesung gegenüber einer literaturgeschichtlichen Herangehensweise nach wie vor privilegiert." – p. 247.

[7] Cf. Piennisch, Markus. „Der biblisch-semitische Aspekt der Hermeneutik: Eine Einführung in das Studiengebiet", *Stuttgarter Theologische Themen*, Band 5 (2010): 101-137.

[8] Ryken, Leland. „Reading the Bible as Literature", *Boundless Webzine*, October 16, 2008. - www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001870.cfm - Ryken here makes a split between "history" and "literature" in order to bridge the hermeneutical gap of "then" and "now", and thereby trying to overcome the "ugly ditch of history" (G.E. Lessing): "The subject of literature is human experience rendered as concretely as possible. The result is that it possesses a universal quality. Whereas history and the daily news tell us what *happened*, literature tells us what *happens* — what is true for all people in all places and times. A text can be both informational and literary, but its literary dimension resides in its embodiment of recognizable human experience." (ibid.). In contrast, the chain of facts of God's revelation provides the continuity and continuous unity of revelation, experience and documentation as a basic structure of the biblical Semitic worldview. - cf. Ryken, Leland; Longman, Tremper III (ed.). *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

[9] Nevertheless we have to recognize that the perception of the literary genres of biblical texts is showing the general direction of interpretation, as Ryken explains: "The idea of the Bible as literature began with the Bible itself. The writers refer to a whole range of literary genres in which they write: proverb, saying, chronicle, complaint (lament psalm), oracle, apocalypse, parable, song, epistle, and many others. Secondly, some of these forms correspond to the literary forms current in the authors' surrounding cultures. For example, the Ten Commandments are cast in the form of the suzerainty treaties that ancient Near Eastern kings imposed on their subjects, and the NT epistles show many affinities to the structure of Greek and Roman letters of the same era. … The importance of genre to biblical interpretation is that genres have their own methods of procedure and rules of interpretation. An awareness of genre should alert us to what we can expect to find in a text. Additionally, considerations of genre should govern the terms in which we interact with a text." - Ryken, Leland. „Reading the Bible as Literature", *Boundless Webzine*, October 16, 2008. - www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001870.cfm

[10] See the remark by Hardmeier, Christof. „Literaturwissenschaft, *biblisch*", *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4. Aufl., Band 5 (Tübingen: Mohr, 2002), pp. 425-426: „Bibl. L. arbeitet auf der Grundlage, dass ihr Beobachtungsgegenstand ‚Text' … die überlieferte Spur und das einstige Medium literaler (schriftgestützter) Kommunikation von gesellschaftlichen Gruppen ist, die das bibl. Schrifttum von der altisraelit. Königszeit bis zum Juden- und Christentum der Spätantike geprägt haben. … Somit fällt der L. als Methode die primäre Aufgabe zu, die synchron-funktionale Einheit und textpragmatische Gesamtanlage von Texten an ihrer Sprachgestalt zu erfassen, um

sie als lit. Spuren und Zeugnisse einstiger gesellschaftlicher Kommunikation auf ihren literaturgesch. Ort und ihre soziohist. Funktionszusammenhänge hin befragen und untersuchen zu können."

[11] Hardmeier, p. 429, aptly remarks: „Mit diesen Methoden der L.[iteraturwissenschaft] lassen sich somit die literale Kommunikation der bibl. Textüberlieferung und ihre Konventionen der Anknüpfung und Relecture mindestens seit dem 8. Jh. v.Chr. aus dem Nachvollzug der Medien selbst rekonstruieren, in denen sie bis heute weitergegeben wurden. Jedoch ergeben sich daraus nicht nur Einblicke in die bibl. Literaturgesch.[ichte], sondern auch in die innere Dynamik der bibl. Texte und ihre theol. Orientierungskraft, die auch für die gegenwärtige Auslegung fruchtbar werden können."

[12] For an introduction, cf. Piennisch, Markus. „Religionen in der Perspektive christlicher Mission: Historische und theologische Aspekte", *Stuttgarter Theologische Themen*, Band 4 (2009): 113-133.

[13] *Der edle Qur'an und die Übersetzung seiner Bedeutungen in die deutsche Sprache*, übersetzt von Scheich ´Abdullah as-Samit, Frank Bubenheim und Dr. Nadeem Elyas (König-Fahd-Komplex zum Druck von Qur'an: al-Madina al-Munauwara/ Königreich Saudi Arabien, o.J.).

[14] Dawud and also Sulaiman appear also in Sure 21,78-79, however, only as part of a list of other Biblical persons, like Lut, Nuh, Ayyub, etc. - *Der edle Qur'an,* pp. 328-329; on the background, cf. Speyer, pp. 377-378.

[15] *Der edle Qur'an,* p. 454.

[16] Cf. the summary on „Mohammed and the Qoranic Da'ud- and Sulaiman-narrative" by Speyer, Heinrich. *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1988), pp. 402-404. As Sternberg aptly remarks, the rise of David from his anointing to his throne also includes the movement of Israel from a united

Kingdom to a united nation. – Sternberg, Meir. *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 423.

[17] Cf. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, A.C. *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is.* Second Edition, revised and enlarged, with the original Sanskrit text, roman transliteration, English equivalents, translation and elaborate purports (Mumbai: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1986).

[18] Michaels, Axel. "Hinduismus. III. Gesellschaft", *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4. Aufl., Band 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 2000), p. 1770.

[19] Michaels, p. 1770, aptly remarks: „Für die hinduistische Mythologie sind neben den Epen (ab ca. 3. Jh. v.Chr.) v.a. die Puranas (wörtl. ‚alte Geschichten', ab ca. 4. Jh. n.Chr.) von Bedeutung; sie enthalten freilich nicht nur Mythen und Kosmologien, sondern auch Genealogien und philos. wiss. Abh.[andlungen]. Von der übrigen philos.-wiss. Lit.[eratur] haben die Texte der philos. Systeme … nachhaltigen Einfluß gehabt."

[20] A Christian perspective on Buddhist thought is provided by: Burnett, David. *The Spirit of Buddhism*. Second edition (London: Monarch, 2003).

[21] See www.palikanon.com; for a definition of Pali Canon, cf. "Pâli-Kanon. Bezeichnung für das in der Pali-Sprache verfasste kanonische Schrifttum des frühen Buddhismus. Es setzt sich aus drei Einzelwerken zusammen: Vinayapitaka (Ordensdisziplin für Mönche und Nonnen) Suttapitaka (Lehrreden Buddhas) und Abhidhammapitaka (scholastische Ausführungen). Diese drei Bücher bilden zusammen den so genannten »Dreikorb« oder Tipitaka. Der Kanon wurde im 1. Jahrhundert v. Chr. schriftlich niedergelegt und bildet die dogmatische Grundlage des Theravada der ältesten und heute zugleich einzig überlebenden Schule des alten Buddhismus." - www.uni-

protokolle.de/Lexikon/Pali-Kanon.html;
for a short introduction on the transition from the oral to the written tradition in Buddhism, cf. Metz, Wulf (Hg.). *Handbuch Weltreligionen* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1992), p. 234; I. Astley aptly remarks on Buddhist literature: „Aufgrund seiner langen Gesch.[ichte] und geographischen Ausdehnung weist der B.[uddhismus] eine Fülle von lit. Werken auf, deren Spannbreite von einfachen Gesprächen des Buddha über analytische Kommentarwerke philos. Charakters bis hin zur didaktischen Lit.[eratur] reicht. … Die buddhistische Lit.[eratur] umfasst auch Schriften ausdrücklich rel.[igiöser] und mythologischer Art, Dichtung sowie Biogr.[aphien] und Hagiographien (…).“ - Astley, Ian. „Buddhismus. I. Religionsgeschichtlich", *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4. Aufl., Band 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1998), p. 1845.

[22] On the interchange between the fear of God and righteousness, cf. Wassermann, Peter. „Monotheismus und Gottesfurcht", *Stuttgarter Theologische Themen*, Band 1 (2006): 7-10.

[23] Because it gives to humans the benefit of God eternally (hb. `olam), and not only continuously from generation to generation (hb. *le dor wa dor*).

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