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Faceless Divine Energies in the Old Testament?

A Conversation with Erhard Gerstenberger

Edgar Kellenberger

1 Preliminary Remark

As a young theologian, I received advice from my doctoral supervisor, when I swung the argumentative club against a dissenting exegete without worrying. In order to dampen my youthful recklessness, he said: “This opponent has also made a lot of thought; he therefore deserves your respect, even if he holds an opinion that seems completely absurd to you.” I hope that I will not offend against this advice if, in the following, I argue against the pointed opinion of Erhard Gerstenberger. Since last year this meritorious scholar from Marburg discusses his thesis with me in his fair manner; and after his seeing the final text of this article, he approves its publication¹.

2 Gerstenberger’s Thesis

Gerstenberger recently published a particularly pointed view: By referring to Sumerian praise songs, he speaks of *semi-autonomous beings* or *faceless energies*; these *gain a quasi-independent existence*². In Israel, Gerstenberger finds such numinous beings as positive powers: particularly חסד, חסד, אמת, צדק, שלום, דבר and תורה. Two examples:

- Ps 143:11b: “By your righteousness (בצדקתך) bring my soul out of trouble!”
- Ps 6:5: “Return, YHWH, deliver my soul, and save me for your loving kindness’ sake (חסדך למען)!”

¹ GERSTENBERGER, *Faceless Energies*, email communication [Accessed 30-08-2018].

² GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 36 and 39. Similar formulations can already be found in GERSTENBERGER, *Psalms*, 130 and *passim*. His study of Sumerian texts is based on GERSTENBERGER, *Theologie des Lobens* – a respectable additional doctoral dissertation in Sumerology by a professor emeritus!

He further points to Ps 5:8; 13:6; 21:8; 25:5-7; 65:6; 103:11.17 and other passages. But he also finds destructive forces such as wrath and anger (Ps 2:5; 21:10; 69:25; 90:7; 102:11), vengeance (Ps 94:1; Isa 59:18; Mic 5:14) and others. All these beings seem to operate in some distance from YHWH, by acting on their own.

These terms are often related to YHWH by a pronominal suffix; however, in some cases this grammatical reference is missing, so that we may get the impression of greater autonomy. But Gerstenberger does not see a great difference, because he has another view on the function of a pronominal suffix than a relation between a proprietor and a possessed, typical for our Western thinking. He categorically denies that a connection by a pronominal suffix points to YHWH als proprietor possessing his own qualities (צדקה, etc.), what would be a modern adaption to church dogmatics (in the sense of: the sovereign Lord acts solely on his own impetus)³. Instead he understands these formulations in the light of Sumerian eulogies, namely as human endorsement of divine powers by the individual singer and the congregation. The positive forces, acting in favor of the Israelites, need to be acknowledged, praised and proclaimed by the believers. He exemplifies that, e.g., by Ps 145:6-7:

The might of your awesome deeds (נוראותיך) shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness (גדולתיך),
They shall declare the fame of your abundant goodness (טובך רב),
shall cheer your righteousness (צדקתך).

Gerstenberger brings a total of several dozen passages of evidence (with and without pronominal suffix), which he understands in the sense of *faceless energies*.

This approach may seem strange at first glance. However, it is connected with fundamental reflections on the strangeness of biblical statements, which must not be leveled by ecclesiastical-dogmatic traditions, but are to be read within the framework of the Ancient Near Eastern world view: "Exegetical work with ancient texts implies a consciousness of historical and mental differences."⁴ I have to take Gerstenberger's concern seriously when I criticize his thesis in the following. In addition, he also combines his thesis with practical theological considerations; I will discuss them at the end of this article.

³ GERSTENBERGER, Power of Praise, 37-38.

⁴ GERSTENBERGER, Power of Praise, 42.

3 Comparison with YHWH's (Right) Arm

Gerstenberger's view of *faceless energies* includes his observation that these energies are never the addressees of prayers and praise; praise is addressed always to YHWH Himself⁵. In fact, a vocative for חסד, צדק, etc., is missing in the Old Testament. On the other hand, I find a vocative for a body part of YHWH in Deutero-Isaiah: "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of YHWH!" (Isa 51:9).

The question of whether YHWH's arm becomes a *semi-autonomous being* seems to be a bit too subtle and inappropriate. But one could call further observations. Sometimes the arm comes to the aid of a person, being either another person or the owner of the arm. For the latter, I mention three verses where YHWH's arm paradoxically helps YHWH Himself (עִשׂוּ *hiphil*):

- Ps 98:1b: "His right hand and His holy arm have worked salvation for Him."
- Isa 59:16: "He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore, His own arm brought salvation to Him; and His righteousness, it upheld Him."
- variant in Isa 63:5: "I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore, My own arm brought salvation to Me; and My wrath, it upheld Me."

In the last document it is noticeable that God's arm and his wrath (חמה) appear in the *parallelismus membrorum*. Gerstenberger quotes this passage as evidence that God's anger here corresponds to his thesis of *semi-autonomous beings*⁶. But should this logically apply to God's arm, too? Significantly, Gerstenberger does not comment on that; the idea would be really absurd. On the

⁵ This does not always apply to Sumerian literature. At least in one example (cited by GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 33-34.) the numen *ningišzida* is mentioned in the vocative. Unfortunately, Gerstenberger does not comment on this. – And concerning the Old Testament: He insists (GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 38.) on translating Ps 145:7 "singing aloud your righteousness" (against NRSV: "... of your righteousness", what would be "an adaption to current theological misconceptions"), but such a hymnic singing comes closer to a vocative צדקה. But Gerstenberger generally denies a vocative for these *semi-autonomous beings*: "Sie werden aber nicht angesprochen, weil sie keine Personenstruktur haben: Sie wirken offenbar autonom oder semi-autonom." (GERSTENBERGER, *Faceless Energies*, email communication [Accessed 30-08-2018]).

⁶ GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 37.

other hand, we know from the Ancient Near Eastern iconography the common notion that a divine or royal figure with his raised right arm kills an enemy (see *Figure 1*). In this respect, the parallelism of arm and anger is self-evident. Arm and anger are part of the same person, so that we do not need Gerstenberger's thesis here; the same applies to YHWH's arm and צדקה in Isa 59:16.



Figure 1: Stela from Ugarit (Source: KELL, *Bildsymbolik*, 193.)

4 Another Analogy: The Night in Job 3

As a further analogy, I choose an example, which is not mentioned by Gerstenberger, but which seems to me to be revealing due to the richness and detail of the formulations: In a long passage of about ten verses, Job curses the day of his birth and the night of his conception (Job 3). The statements about the night are interesting and unusual:

- the night can speak, and obviously she knows about the time of Job's conception (v. 3b: "the night said: a boy has been conceived"),
- the night can hope (v. 9a: "she may hope for light"),
- the night can see (v. 9b: "she shall not see the rays of the dawn"),
- the night is believed to be able of closing the cervix (v. 10a: "she did not close the door of the womb to me").

Because of these formulations, the night would actually be a suitable candidate for Gerstenberger's thesis of *semi-autonomous powers*. But this would

disregard the unmistakably paradoxical character of the poetic statement. The most obvious paradox is that the night is to become darkness (v. 5), or that darkness is to ravage the night (v. 6) and even the stars are to become darkness (v. 9). The paradox of such statements is much stronger than a possible reminiscence of a mythological figure that could be concealed behind Job's curse of the night⁷. And because of the paradoxical formulations it would be too little to speak of the night as a personification or a metonym. By its poetic character, Job 3 uses numerous metaphors for describing Job's contradictory feelings.

5 Metaphor As Condensed And Paradoxical Statement

In my understanding of metaphors, I rely on the theories of the late Donald Davidson and of Christian Strub, teaching at Berlin. For both, the paradox or absurdity of a metaphorical statement is constitutive. They are thus opposed to the common Aristotelian understanding that the metaphor is based on a similarity⁸. Strub talks about the basic "metaphoric scandal"⁹. He makes a sharp distinction between a comparison and a metaphor: "The metaphor, literally understood, produces an absurdity, the comparison does not."¹⁰ And Davidson says: "Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight."¹¹ In this way, a metaphor opens

⁷ Especially in the Book of Job – as in other poetic literature – numinous and mythical elements can be hidden behind metaphorical language. See in particular FUCHS, *Mythos*, who however demonstrates how the poetic statement also overtakes the content of the myth fragment.

⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics* 1457b: "A metaphor is the transmission of a word, either from the genus to the species or from the species to the genus, or from one species to another, or according to the rules of analogy" (μεταφορὰ δὲ ἐστὶν ὀνόματος ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορὰ ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ γένους ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ εἶδους ἐπὶ τὸ γένος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ κατὰ τὸ ἀνάλογον). For an overview of the diverging theories, see ROLF, *Metaphertheorien*.

⁹ STRUB, *Kalkulierte Absurditäten*, 31. This formulation goes back to Umberto Eco (STRUB, *Kalkulierte Absurditäten*, 100.). Strub's theory is based on approaches by Paul Ricoeur and American linguistic philosophers.

¹⁰ STRUB, *Kalkulierte Absurditäten*, 416.

¹¹ DAVIDSON, *What Metaphors Mean*, 224. This and the following quotes are from his classic treatise (1978; reprint 2006): "Absurdity or contradiction in a metaphorical sentence guarantees we won't believe it and invites us, under proper circumstances, to take the sentence metaphorically" (DAVIDSON, *What Metaphors Mean*, 209). His thesis is, that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (DAVIDSON, *What Metaphors Mean*, 224).

up our view of the new and reveals a reality that we have not yet been able to express.

I find all this in the paradoxical night metaphors of Job 3. Job's despair can be expressed in a denser and more concentrated way than an apparently more precise and "plausible" formulation.

The same is true of the two Trito-Isaiah passages quoted above, where YHWH's arm and wrath (or צדקה) stand by YHWH's side in a helpful way. We find here an unexpectedly massive formulation: YHWH is "disturbed/horrified" (שמם *hitpol*) that He cannot find a helper¹². In this way He helps Himself – with His own arm and His anger (Isa 64:5) or His salvation (צדקה, 59:16). The paradoxical formulation shows in an extraordinary way YHWH's absolute sovereignty, which acts without other helpers. In the following v. 17, four objects of YHWH's clothing are listed: צדקה, ישועה, נקם and קנאה. Clothes are not semi-personal beings and certainly not semi-autonomous, but belong as an identity-forming part to the person wearing these clothes¹³. In consequence, it is YHWH Himself, who will repay (שלם *piel*) His adversaries (v. 18).

When salvation, vengeance and zeal are YHWH's clothes and therefore identical with YHWH, a look is necessary for other terms, which seem to demonstrate a more autonomous character: דבר, חכמה and תורה. Gerstenberger, by quoting Gen 1 and Ps 33:6, sees God's Word to function like an inspired instrument in the creative act¹⁴. The Word of YHWH can fertilize the ground and accomplish His will (Isa 55:10-11), but also demonstrate a terrible destructive force (Jer 23:29). And the Torah becomes an agent in the cultic ceremonies (Neh 8) and is praised in hymns (Ps 19)¹⁵. But all these texts are using metaphors for describing YHWH's will. By neglecting this metaphorical character, we are producing ontological statements, which say more about our Western philosophy than about Israel's thinking.

Surprisingly, Gerstenberger never mentions the Lady Wisdom in Prov 8, although she could confirm his thesis of positive energies *sui generis*, being in some distance from YHWH. However, חכמה here is neither a *faceless* nor an *impersonal being*, but is described very concretely by metaphorical formulations.

¹² See Isa 41:28: "YHWH looks around among the gods and finds no counselor".

¹³ Isa 59:17; against GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 37 ("maintaining an own identity").

¹⁴ GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 40-41.

¹⁵ GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 40-42. There his conclusion: "In short, the Word of Yahwe and the canonized collection of His sayings are to be acknowledged as spiritual forces *sui generis*."

She accompanied YHWH when He created the world, and therefore is a good companion of humans as well. She is not separated from YHWH, but expresses His order in creation. Similarly, the Torah in Ps 19 is a metaphorical expression of YHWH's own will.

6 Metaphorical Statements with חסד, אמת, צדק, etc.

Gerstenberger discusses some important examples. In Ps 89:15 we read¹⁶:

צדק and משפט are the base of your throne,
חסד and אמת step before your face.

Such a pictorially descriptive statement is not an isolated case. Another example is the end of Ps 85 (vv. 11-12.14):

חסד and אמת meet each other,
צדק and שלום kiss (each other?)¹⁷,
אמת blows out of the earth,
צדק looks down from heaven ...
צדק goes before him (*scilicet* YHWH)
and determines the path of his steps.

What appears – at least in our Western thinking – as a series of mental-abstract terms is surprisingly pictorial and concrete in these Hebrew formulations. Therefore, many exegetes find here a personification¹⁸ or a *genius*¹⁹, what indicates a numinous and almost divine character. Gerstenberger goes a great step further, when he separates these energies from YHWH's activity and gives to them more sovereignty.

The interpretation of Ps 85:11-14 has been much questioned; the proposed solutions are controversial. For example, it remains unclear whether all the terms mentioned are divine in nature, or whether they at least partly refer to human traits²⁰. If these are metaphorical statements, irritating statements can also be expected. I suggest that these poetic-illustrative statements are meant as

¹⁶ Addressed to God. But GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 39: “The ruling king is being addressed.”

¹⁷ For the difficulties around the verbal form נשקו see EDER, *Do Justice*.

¹⁸ So again EDER, *Do Justice*.

¹⁹ For example, the psalm commentary by HOSSFELD – ZENGER, *Psalmen*, 591 (*Genien*); or KEEL, *Geschichte Jerusalems*, 190-191 and 810 (with references to Ancient Near Eastern iconography).

²⁰ So, e.g., COETZEE, *Psalm 85*.

concretions of YHWH's manifold activities and thus stand in a certain analogy to the above quoted passages in Trito-Isaiah²¹.

Remains the passage Ps 89:15:

צדק and משפט are the basis of your throne,
חסד and אמת step before your face²².

And the analogous formulation in Ps 97:2:

There are clouds and cloud darkness around him,
צדק and משפט are the pillars of his throne.

I confess that I feel rather insecure about these statements. Concerning צדק and משפט, many scholars²³ point to visible representations from Egyptian iconography demonstrating the basis of the divine throne: The beveled base of the throne has the shape of a hieroglyph, which is constitutive of Maat's spelling (see *Figures 2 and 3*).

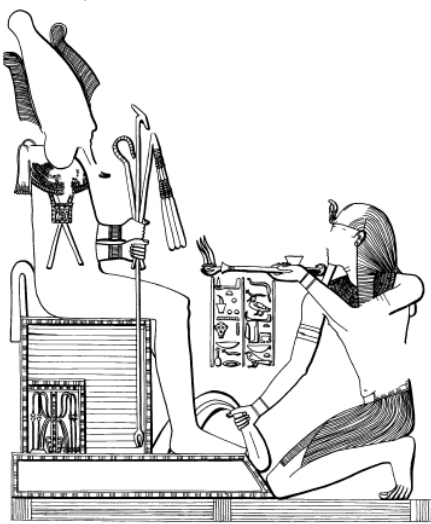


Figure 2: Abydos, 1300 BCE (Source: KEEL, *Bildsymbolik*, 253.)

²¹ See Eder's observation (EDER, *Do Justice*, 396) that in Ps 85:14b it remains unclear whether "his steps" refer to YHWH or to צדק. The common Mesopotamian formulations on Kittu and Mešaru, which are standing to the left and right of the main deity (e.g., FALKENSTEIN – VON SODEN, *Hymnen und Gebete*, 222, 320, 334), cannot automatically be understood in a polytheistic culture in the same way as in Israel.

²² Another translation: "o before you".

²³ See HOSSFELD – ZENGER, *Psalmen*, 679 (with illustration).

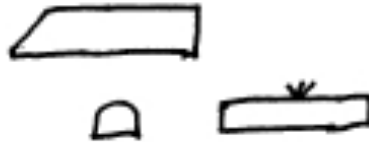


Figure 3: Hieroglyphic notation of Ma'at (drawing by the author)



Figure 4: Abydos (sandstone), 1300 BCE (Source: KEEL, *Bildsymbolik*, 258.)

The question is how to interpret this interesting observation. For Egypt, it can be assumed that a theological statement has become pictorial, as can also be observed in other cases in this culture²⁴. If we may speak of a materialized metaphor, so to speak, it is difficult to decide whether the thought or the image came first. It should be noted that Maat elsewhere is portrayed differently as numen, especially as a figure of a goddess with a feather on her head (see *Figure 4*). Is the throne pedestal as a Maat hieroglyphic a learned idea or metaphor?

Additional questions arise when we look at the Israelite variants. What does it mean if Maat were Israelitized by a Hebrew word pair? The word pair *חסד* and *אמת*²⁵ seems to be far away from Egypt (the same applies to clouds and cloud darkness). As long as these questions cannot be clarified, one should not deduce too much from Ps 89:15.

²⁴ Compare, e.g., KEEL, *Bildsymbolik*, 31, 233.

²⁵ See KELLENBERGER, *ḥāsād wā'āmāt*.

7 Gerstenberger's Practical-Theological Concern

It is rather unusual that an author, within a scholarly exegetic contribution, reveals his personal existential concerns. In doing it, Gerstenberger speaks from the heart of many of his contemporaries, both secular and bound by a Church.

His interest in *impersonal energies* is related to the experience that our modern existence is essentially shaped by impersonal forces²⁶: machines, electronics, medicine, agriculture, etc., follow impersonal, physical and chemical laws of nature. These can be influenced neither by magic nor by prayers²⁷.

In Gerstenberger's opinion, these impersonal powers have their own potential for realizing a good and just society. They deserve to be praised side by side with God. Justice, forgiveness and solidarity are good companions then and now. Christians should therefore welcome today's values of human dignity, democracy and the equivalence of races, sexes and religions as *divine energies*.

8 Critical Discussion

I have several questions:

- Is this an uncritical and ultimately apologetic commitment to today's values of many intellectuals with Western education – and thus a provincial event in view of our world society with its sometimes very diverging values?
- Is Gerstenberger's warning of levelling the strange Israelitic (and Near Eastern) thinking compatible with his propaganda for Western faceless energies (democracy, equivalence of religions, etc.)?
- Furthermore: Is this a new edition of Rudolf Bultmann's argumentation on his demythologization program?²⁸

²⁶ In the following, I sum up GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 46.

²⁷ This makes Gerstenberger all the more surprised that today's spiritual life remains largely untouched by these everyday realities; instead, most Christians would flee back to the realm of myths and personal cults.

²⁸ BULTMANN, *Entmythologisierung*, 18: "It is not possible to use electric light and radio equipment, to use modern medical and clinical means in cases of illness and at the same time to believe in the New Testament's world of ghosts and wonders. And those who think they can do it for their own person must make it clear that if they declare this for the attitude of the Christian faith, they will make Christian preaching in the present incomprehensible and impossible." (my own translation)

But I don't want to spend any longer with suspicions, but rather ask exegetically:

- Gerstenberger's *faceless energies* seem strangely vague and abstract to me – in contrast to the vivid poetic statements of the psalms and prophets. The concrete and sensual descriptions of the “instruction of YHWH” in Ps 19 are not faceless²⁹;
- Gerstenberger, rubbing against the dogmatic tradition of a monocausal YHWH, sees a “personal god” merely as a modern construct that satisfies our own need for rationality³⁰, without corresponding to the Old Testament³¹. But I do not find an abstract-mathematical monotheism in the biblical witnesses (not even in Deutero-Isaiah), but rather in the European tradition of enlightenment and in Islam. YHWH does not act in a monocausal manner, but on the contrary so inconsistently that all attempts of a dogmatic systematization must fail (I only remember Job and the statements of hardening in Exod 4ff and Isa 6)³². The biblical authors do not need to recur to additional numinous or divine powers in order to balance out logical contradictions. “Monocausal”, on the other

²⁹ Even to the “word of YHWH” Gerstenberger assigns once (GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 41.) a physical body and wants to prove this with Isa 55:10-11 (“As the rain and snow come down from heaven..., my word does not return empty.”).

³⁰ In his mail of 21.02.2018, he voiced even clearer fundamental criticism of our prerequisites for thinking: “In our doctrinal system everything must go back to the personal God, although we constantly deal with the other, non-personal effects and talk about them (God works through...). The concept of person can never fully grasp the reality of God because it is too narrow, too literal. It is an accommodation to our small-scale notions of activity that do not satisfactorily explain even our own circumstances. Who knows which forces are effective in one's own body, brain, feelings, in the human and natural environment? (Dawkins speaks of an idiosyncratic gene that has us completely in its hands!).” (GERSTENBERGER, *Faceless Energies?*, email communication [Accessed 21-02-2018].)

³¹ Gerstenberger's final sentences in his e-mail, however, are criticizing also the Old Testament, especially with regard to its vividly personal statements: “Talking of God's being a person is extraordinarily shortening, both in antiquity and in modernity. We need such statements in order to satisfy our means of expression and communication. The impersonal is far from our imagination.” (GERSTENBERGER, *Faceless Energies?*, email communication [Accessed 21-02-2018].) And mail of 22 February: “The will and person area with its categories is too narrow to make theological statements for itself.” (GERSTENBERGER, *Faceless Energies?*, email communication [Accessed 22-02-2018].)

³² Compare the exegetical monograph of KELLENBERGER, *Verstockung*, including also the history of Jewish and Christian interpretations of two millennia.

hand, is rather our current use of scientific laws of nature and mathematical formulas;

- I consent that Israel is much connected with the Ancient Near East, but I am nevertheless astonished how loosely Gerstenberger describes **דסד** as an Ancient Near Eastern analogue, without mentioning equivalent lexemes in the other languages³³. If he calls **דסד** “a glue of small social groups”, he will hardly be able to find a linguistic equivalent in the neighbouring civilizations³⁴;
- Gerstenberger sees that “in some passages such potencies are nothing but direct actions of the Lord”³⁵. But he does not mention such passages anywhere, but concentrates on the other passages where he finds a certain distance between YHWH and a self-acting other power. He does not specify any criteria as to when he accepts one or the other understanding.

9 Ending

With good reason, Gerstenberger warns against the danger of ignoring the strangeness of many biblical statements and instead adapting them to our own cultural ideas. I wonder whether he will fall into the same temptation by finding the values of today’s Western enlightened intellectuals in the Old Testament. It is the task of the scholarly community to help each other against the temptation of obscuring the strangeness of biblical statements in order to save our own preconceived opinions.

³³ GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 38.

³⁴ The monography of KELLENBERGER, *ḥāsād wā’āmāt* demonstrates its impossibility. For a necessary differentiation between **דסד** and similar terms (זן, רחמים, צדקה), see KELLENBERGER, **דסד** und sinnverwandte Lexeme.

³⁵ GERSTENBERGER, *Power of Praise*, 36.

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Summary

In 2016, Erhard Gerstenberger published a pointed thesis. Being aware that “exegetical work with ancient texts implies a consciousness of historical and mental differences”, he uses his studies about Sumerian hymns for his interpretation of “righteousness”, “lovingkindness”, “anger”, “vengeance” and further Hebrew terms. He understands these terms as semi-autonomous numinous energies operating in some distance from YHWH. The present article critically discusses this thesis by stressing the paradoxical character of metaphorical formulations. In addition, the far-reaching consequences of Gerstenberger’s spiritual view for Christian faith are presented and rejected by exegetical and ideological arguments.

Keywords: Psalms, metaphor, Sumerian hymns.

Zhrnutie

V roku 2016 publikoval Erhard Gerstenberger istú kritickú tézu. Keďže si dobre uvedomoval, že „exegetická práca so starovekými textami so sebou prináša poznanie dejinných a mentálnych rozdielností“, použil na interpretáciu termínov „spravodlivosť“, „láskavosť“, „hnev“, „pomsta“ ako aj ďalších hebrejských slov svoje štúdie o sumerských hymnoch. Uvedené termíny rozumie ako akési polo-autonómne božské energie, pôsobiace v istom odstupe vo vzťahu k YHWH-mu. Nami predložená štúdia kriticky rozoberá uvedenú tézu, pričom zdôrazňuje paradoxný charakter metaforických slovných vyjadrení. Navyše tiež predstavuje ďalekosiahle dôsledky Gerstenbergerovho duchovného pohľadu na kresťanskú vieru a, uvedením exegetických a ideologických argumentov, ju ako takú odmieta.

Kľúčové slová: žalmy, metafora, sumerské hymny.

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