

Negative Theology as an Expression of God's Freedom in *the Torah of the Book of Deuteronomy* and Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract: This paper traces the history of the negative theology of YHWH from the beginning of the integration of YHWH into the Canaanite pantheon to the post-exilic period in the Torah through the interpretation of the Sh'ma' Israel from its mono-Yahwistic understanding to monotheism as an expression of God's freedom. In the second step, the development of negative theology is traced from the pre-exilic proverbs, which understand God as a limit of knowledge, to negative theology in the Book of Job and Qohelet, as well as the overcoming of negative theology in the paradise-narrative in Genesis 2–3 through the freedom of choice granted to man by God.

Keywords: negative theology, monotheism, mono-Yahwism, monolatry, henotheism, biblical epistemology, Proverbs, gnomic apperception, Ecclesiastes, Job, good and evil, paradise-narrative

1. God's Transcendence and Non-Worldliness as Expression for His Freedom in the *Texts of the Book of Deuteronomy* which show the Development of a Negative Theology of Monotheism as an Expression of Divine Transcendence

When the Hebrew Bible speaks of God in linguistic figures of negative theology, it is about the linguistic expression of God's transcendence and superiority to the world, with the primary focus not being on God's separateness from the world and the resulting impossibility to define God's attributes, features or to make statements about the divine essence. Rather, it is about God's freedom, which is not to be restricted by human wishful projections from a mythical worldview. As the non-worldly and transcendent God who is not a function of human desires, He cuts through all human-mythical desire projections by virtue of His divine freedom.

From the beginning of the religious history of YHWH as the God of Israel, He was, as a God from the desert in the south, a stranger in His Canaanite context in the Promised Land who, as a desert God was not an autochthonous weather God from Palestine¹ but was integrated as a stranger into the Canaanite-Mythic pantheon

¹ Cf. Koch, "Übersiedlung," 171–209; Leuenberger, "Herkunft," 1–19; Römer, *Erfindung*, 53–64; Miller, *Origin*, 61–92; *pace* Pfeiffer, *Kommen*; Müller, *Wettergott*.

and subordinated to the God El, as is still the case in Ps 89:6–8 and texts from the 9th–8th-century caravanserais of *Kuntillet 'Ağrud*. There, God is differentiated in individual manifestations of “YHWH of Samaria” and “YHWH of Teman.”² The foreign, non-autochthonous god YHWH, however, was able to free Himself from the grip and subordination into the Syrian-Canaanite pantheon. As a reaction to this divine act of emancipation, the Sh^c ma’ Israel is formulated in Deut 6:4–5 and with it, the first approach of the development towards a negative theology: “Hear Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH is one. You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, with all your strength of your soul and with all your might.”

The history of the understanding of Sh^c ma’ Israel from the pre-exilic period of the 7th century as the opening of a primal pre-exilic Deuteronomy (“Urdeuteronomium”) in Deut 12–26; 28* to the post-exilic period of the 4th century, reflects the shift in the understanding of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible from a mono-Yahwism that overcame the disintegration of YHWH into numerous manifestations to a monolatrous and monotheistic understanding. The change in how God was understood in the Hebrew Bible from mono-Yahwism in the 7th century to a monolatrous-henotheistic understanding in the 6th century (which overcame the disintegration of YHWH into numerous manifestations) to the assertion of monotheism in the post-exilic period in the 5th/4th century, reflects the development of negative theology in the Hebrew Bible. Negative theology in the Bible, which emphasizes God’s otherness and transcendence, is rooted in the foreignness of YHWH in relation to His Canaanite environment in the history of religion so that the emancipation from the quasi-mythical embrace by the religion-historical environment after His transfer to the Promised Land gives birth to impulses that were later developed into those of world-delimitation and world-otherness.

The Sh^c ma’ Israel consists of two nominal clauses in Deut 6:4 after a call for Israel to listen:

יהוה אלהינו

יהוה אחד

The first nominal clause יהוה אלהינו enters into a relationship with the second יהוה אחד as an explanation, in which אחד is a predicate, which here originally, as in Gen 2:24, has the semantic connotation of “unity” in the sense of “wholeness,” so that the Sh^c ma’ Israel is to be interpreted mono-Yahwistically. In addition, אחד could also gain the meaning “only one,” for Deut 6:4 to be interpreted monolatrically or monotheistically. The decision as to which of the two interpretations is correct is based on the respective literary context in which the Sh^c ma’ Israel is embedded. Deut 6:4b יהוה אחד is a mono-Yahwistic confessional formula expressing that YHWH is *one* who is not disintegrated into a multitude of local manifestations and cannot be locally differentiated and thus manipulated. As the introductory

² Cf. Miller, *Origin*, 61–68.

sentence of the pre-exilic “Urdeuteronomium” of the 7th century, the Sh^c ma’ Israel – as an expression of the unity of God in an act of confession – is connected with the basic concern of the pre-exilic Deuteronomy, the centralization of the sacrificial cult at one sanctuary, according to Deut 12*, which was to be the one sanctuary in Jerusalem.³ The one God corresponds to the one temple. Just as God cannot be disintegrated into a multitude of manifestations but is one, so too the sacrifices are not to be offered at a multitude of temples and sanctuaries. The entire country is to be subordinated to the holiness of the one God. Thus the confession formula יהוה אחד is also connected via the centralization commandment in Deut 12* to the subsequent commandment of loyalty to YHWH, the one God of Israel, in Deut 13:2–12*. The one God to whom undivided loyalty is to be given is the one undivided God who does not break up into a variety of manifestations. There is a close argumentative connection between Deut 6:4–5 and Deut 13:2–12*. In Deut 6:5, the demand to love YHWH with all one’s heart, all one’s strength of soul, and all one’s might incorporates a central motif of the Neo-Assyrian oaths of loyalty to the great king and treaty literature using the motif of love to denote political loyalty.⁴ In Deut 6:5, this motif of loyalty is transferred from the Assyrian great king to YHWH, the one undivided God, to whom undivided love in the sense of loyalty is to be due. Likewise, from the Neo-Assyrian contract terminology comes the motif of love and devotion “with all one’s heart” (*ina gummurti libbi*). What Deut 6:5 succinctly formulates as a confession, the unrestricted loyalty to YHWH, is broadly developed in Deut 13:2–12*.⁵

After the New Babylonian catastrophe in 587/86 BCE, the Deuteronomistic framing of the pre-exilic “Urdeuteronomium,” through Deut 5–11; 29–30*, introduces the figure of Moses as the promulgator of Deuteronomy and moves its promulgation from Jerusalem to the land of Moab before the entry into the Promised Land. With this location of the promulgation of Deuteronomy in the land of Moab, a connection is also established with the divine revelation at Mount Horeb, where YHWH revealed the Decalogue to the people in Deut 5. Now the prohibition of foreign gods, which includes the prohibition of images, becomes the hermeneutical key of the interpretation of the nominal phrase יהוה אחד in the Sh^c ma’ Israel in Deut 6:4. The “(re)presentation formula” (*Vergegenwärtigungsformel*) “I am YHWH your God”⁶ in Deut 5:6,⁷ modeled on Assyrian royal inscriptions⁸ which, like the prohibition of foreign gods that follows in Deut 5:7 – “you shall have no other gods against me (פני על) – presupposes the existence of other gods, but permits YHWH alone to be worshipped and

³ Cf. Otto, “Jerusalem und Garizim,” 111–145.

⁴ Cf. Parpola – Watanabe, *Treaties*, 11, 66, n. 72.

⁵ Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 1201–1272.

⁶ Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium 1–11*, 716–717.

⁷ In older research of the Hebrew Bible this formula was called a “Selbstvorstellungsformel”; cf. Zimmerli, “Jahwe,” 179–209; Diesel, *Monotheismus*, 87–93.

⁸ Cf. “I am Assurbanipal, king of the world” (*anaku* ^(d)*aššur-bân-aplu šar kiššati*), cf. Borger, *Assurbanipal*, 77.

is thus to be understood monolatrously. This also applies to the interpretation of the Sh^c ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5. According to Deut 6:5 in the Deuteronomistic interpretation of the 6th century, YHWH alone and no other god is to be given love and thus loyalty. Correspondingly, the commandment of loyalty in Deut 13:2–12 is extended deuteronomistically in Deut 13:4 in relation to the Sh^c ma Israel in Deut 6:5:

Deut 6:5 “You shall love YHWH, your God, with all your heart and with all your strength of your soul and with all your might.”

Deut 13:4 “YHWH your God is testing you to see if you love YHWH, your God, with all your heart and with all your strength of your soul.”

Read in this perspective of the Deuteronomistic framing of the laws of Deuteronomy, the main commandments of Deuteronomy in Deut 12 and Deut 13 become a concretization of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5, mediated by the Sh^c ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5. Finally, the Sh^c ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5 is linked to the Deuteronomistic covenant formula in Deut 26:16–17 as the performative pivot of Deuteronomistic Deuteronomy.⁹ There the motif “with all your heart and all the strength of your soul” is linked to the fulfillment of God's commandments and laws. If in the 7th century, the Sh^cma' Israel is about the mono-Yahwistic unity of God, who is not to be split up into a multitude of manifestations at a multitude of places of worship, to whom loyalty is to be given undivided as to the one, then in the 6th century the entire life of God's people Israel is to find its center in the fulfillment of the commandments and laws of YHWH. Accordingly, all other gods of the mythical pantheon that have projective functions in the fulfillment of human desires, are to be rejected. In this respect, the process of separation of God from the world is mirrored by the history of interpretation of the Sh^c ma' Israel, whereby it is not the human projection of desire that is to determine the divine pleroma but, instead, it is God who becomes transcendent that is to determine the actions of humans in the world. The freedom of God, fought for through monolatry on its way to monotheistic transcendence, consistently leads to a presence of God in His Torah promulgated by Moses and thus to a consistent binding of man to the will of God as a countermovement to the binding of the divine world to human projections of expectations.

The tendency towards the transcendentalization of God reaches its goal with the enforcement of the monotheistic interpretation of the denial of the existence of other gods in the First Commandment of the Decalogue and in the Sh^c ma' Israel. In the course of the post-exilic expansion of Deuteronomy, the chapter Deut 4 is inserted into the Deuteronomistic framework of Deuteronomy.¹⁰ Whereas in the Deuteronomistic Deuteronomy, the *monolatric* First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5:6–8a served as a hermeneutical key for the interpretation of the *older* Sh^c

⁹ Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium* 12–34, 1901–1906.

¹⁰ Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium* 1–11, 508–603.

ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5, now Deut 4:35–40 takes its place and becomes the hermeneutical key for the interpretation of the Decalogue and the Shema' Israel:

(Deut 4:35) You experienced it (sc. the Exodus) so that you might know that YHWH is the God, *besides him there is none*. (Deut 4:36) From heaven he made you hear his thunder to teach you, and on earth he made you see his mighty fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. (Deut 4:37) And because he loved your fathers, he chose every descendant after them, and he himself brought you out of Egypt with great power, (Deut 4:38) to drive out nations greater and stronger than you completely from before you, to bring you into the land and give it to you for an inheritance, as it is today. (Deut 4:39) Know therefore this day, and take it to heart, that the God YHWH is above in heaven, and below in the earth, *no one else*. (Deut 4:40) Keep his commandments and his statutes, to which I commit you this day, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long in the land which YHWH your God is giving you for all your days.

In Deut 4:35, conclusion is drawn from the historical memory of the Exodus in the form of rhetorical questions aiming at the uniqueness of God, apart from whom there exists no other God, thus overcoming the monolatrous interpretation of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5 in favor of its monotheistic understanding,¹¹ which is declared as knowledge “you have experienced (ראה) so that you know (ידע).”¹² Deut 4:39 sharpened God's exclusivity to the effect that, for YHWH, there could be no fixing of His heavenly form to any form of earthly representation, with the monotheistic interpretation in Deut 4:35 being applied to the whole of creation. Deut 4:35, 39 serves in the post-exilic literary update in Deuteronomy as a hermeneutical key of monotheistic interpretation for the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5:7–10, in which the emphasis is shifted from the prohibition of foreign gods to the prohibition of images as an expression of God's incommensurability. Beyond the First Commandment, Deut 4:35, 39 also becomes the hermeneutical key to a monotheistic understanding of the Shema' Israel in Deut 6:4–5. In the confessional formula יהוה אלהינו, the relation of subject and predicate is reversed. In the monolatrous interpretation “our God” is the subject and YHWH the predicate; and now YHWH becomes the subject, who is known

¹¹ On the question of the cultural-historical preconditions for the emergence of monotheism in Israel, cf. the media-materialistic approach of Joachim Schaper (*Media and Monotheism*, 55–210), as well as the critical discussion of this monograph in the *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte/Journal for Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Law* 27 (2021) with contributions by, among others, Jan Assmann (“Medien,” 117–131), Rainer Kessler (“Monetarisierung,” 145–166), Jan Dietrich (“Bedingungen,” 167–174), Dominik Markl (“Theologie,” 175–186), Konrad Schmid (“Lesbarkeit,” 187–202) and the replica by Joachim Schaper (“»Medienmaterialistischer« Ansatz,” 227–242).

¹² That Deut 4:35, 39 is not to be interpreted monolatrically or henotheistically, as Nathan MacDonald (*Monotheism*, 78–96) suggests, is shown by the parallelism of the formulations with Isa 45:20–21; cf. Hartenstein, “Gestalt,” 72.

as the predicate that He is “our God.” Through the monotheistic interpretation of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5 through Deut 4:35–40, the transcendence – and thus otherness and non-worldliness – of God becomes the key to the interpretation of the entire Torah, which is summarized in the Mosaic interpretation in the post-exilic Deuteronomy: God becomes God and world becomes world,¹³ and God is in this world in the form of the Torah interpreted by Moses. Thus the freedom of God, who is not limited by any other gods as human-mythical wishful projections, is theologically formulated in Deut 4:35–40; 5:7–10 and Deut 6:4–5 in its monotheistic interpretation. If, through transcendence, God’s freedom is monotheistically articulated and, through the Torah, man’s relationship to God is pragmatically mediated through the active fulfillment of the Torah, the question that arises is how God’s transcendence could also become the justification for man’s freedom in the Hebrew Bible. *God’s freedom can be seen as a prerequisite and as a context for the discovery of human freedom.* To answer this question, it is necessary to look at the literature of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible.

2. God’s Freedom as a Context for the Discovery of Human Freedom

The sapiential Book of Proverbs has a long literary history stretching from the pre-exilic period of the 8th/7th centuries to the post-exilic period of the 4th/3rd centuries, with Prov 10–27 largely dating back to the pre-exilic and Prov 1–9; 28–31 to the post-exilic period.¹⁴ The early sapiential worldview differs from the primarily priestly worldview of the Torah in its consistently empirical approach which deduces structures of order from empirical observations in nature and the coexistence of people:

“North wind brings rain, hidden tongue fretful faces” (Prov 25:23)

“When the wood goes out, the fire goes out;
when there is no one to stir up, the quarrel calms down” (Prov 26:20)

¹³ Cf. Otto, “Axial Phenomena.”

¹⁴ For a history of research on the Book of *Proverbs*, cf. Schipper, *Sprüche*, 1–86. On Prov 28 as post-exilic chapter in Proverbs, cf. Schipper, “Proverbs 28,” 27–44. A blanket late dating of Prov 10–27 is contradicted by the principally different approach to empirical experience in the early Proverbs in contrast to an approach to theological speculation as in Prov 8 in the late wisdom; cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 152–174. The reception of the Egyptian teaching of Amen-em-ope in Prov 22:17–24:22 was the starting point of the literary history of the Proverbs, which underlines its pre-exilic dating; cf. Römhelt, *Wege*; Schipper, “Amenemope,” 53–72, 232–248; Laisney, *L’enseignement*; Reichmann, *Übernahme*. What is astonishing about the Judean reception of the late Egyptian wisdom teaching of Amen-em-ope is that the Judean translators in the first half of the 1st millennium received this teaching of Amen-em-ope, shaped by “Personal Piety” and the associated dissolution of the classical figure of Egyptian wisdom of the 2nd millennium, conservatively as if through the eyes of the authors of the teaching of Ptahhotep of the first half of the 2nd millennium.

The fact that the structures of order are only partially recognizable for human beings and can only be read from individual phenomena, entails an awareness of the limits of wisdom's recognition, preserved by the genre of proverbs as a genre of gnomic apperception:¹⁵ "Three things are too wonderful for me and four I cannot understand. The way of the eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on the rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea, and the way of a man with a young woman" (Prov 30:18–19).

The knowledge of the epistemological limits of empirical cognition is expressed already in the genre of proverbs. If the knowledge of these limits of gnomic apperception is present in the empiricism of approach in wisdom thought, this is even more true when it comes to the apprehension of God, insofar as for this form of wisdom thought, God can only be comprehended as the limit of cognition from empirical experience. The early wisdom of the first half of the first millennium reaches its goal precisely where it comes to understand God as the limit of its possibilities of cognition:

"There is no wisdom, no insight, no counsel that can stand before YHWH" (Prov 21:30)

"Many plans does the heart of a man take, but the counsel of YHWH – it rises to reality" (Prov 19:21)

"From God are the steps of a man,
a man, how can he understand his way of life" (Prov 20:24)

If God can only be expressed as the limit of empirical knowledge, then statements about His essence are just as excluded as the attempt to conceptualize God's will, so that in view of God's impenetrability, man is only referred to an attitude of fear of God: "The fear of YHWH is a source of life, to avoid the snares of death" (Prov 14:27).

The approach of thinking with empirical experience, which can only express God as the limit of knowledge and wisdom, implies knowledge of man's freedom to decide between good and evil in the sense of the reasonable and the unreasonable, to which the wisdom teachers' paraenesis aims. The insight into the limits of one's own wisdom makes an attitude of modesty and humility appear reasonable: "Before the collapse the heart of man is haughty, but before honor there is humility" (Prov 18:12).

In Prov 1–9, the authors of post-exilic wisdom abandoned early wisdom's approach to empirical experience, which God could only bring up in a negative theology as the limit of wisdom, in favor of theological speculation, as in Prov 8 in particular. But this raises the question of where man gained a knowledge of what is good and evil in the eyes of God.¹⁶ While in early wisdom empirical experience in nature and human coexistence became the context of ethos and the source of knowledge about good and evil, this presupposed a trust in the reliability of the order experienced in

¹⁵ Cf. von Rad, *Weisheit*, 41–53.

¹⁶ Cf. Otto, "Gut und Böse," 207–231.

nature but also in society, despite the knowledge of one's own limits of knowledge. This trust was shattered with the experience of the Babylonian catastrophe of Jerusalem and Judah in the 6th century, which led to a consistent monotheization of YHWH in prophecy and Torah,¹⁷ as shown in the interpretation of the Decalogue and Shema' Israel, and in wisdom in its consistent theologization, which turns the empirical approach of the older wisdom on its head and makes YHWH the source of its knowledge:

My son, if you accept my words and heed my commandments, so that your ear listens carefully to wisdom, your heart inclines towards insight, if you call for knowledge, if you ask for insight with a loud voice, if you seek it like silver, search for it like for treasures, then you gain insight into the fear of YHWH and knowledge of God you find, for YHWH gives wisdom, from his mouth comes knowledge and insight. He holds out success for the upright, He gives a shield to the righteous. He guards the paths of justice and protects the way of the upright (Prov 2:1–8).

Wisdom is revealed by the monotheistically understood God YHWH,¹⁸ from His mouth shall come knowledge and insight. However, YHWH does not speak directly to the person asking for wisdom, but the wisdom revealed by God is found in the mouth of wisdom teachers and thus, in the wisdom tradition. The fear of God is now no longer the goal and limit of wisdom, as in the older wisdom, but the starting point and content of wisdom, whereby in the quasi-identity-philosophical speculation of post-exilic wisdom, the content and mediation of the revealed wisdom merge into one, as in Prov 8:22–31, and are connected with a promise of happiness for those who follow it:

My son, do not forget my teaching and keep my commandments in your heart. For the length of the days and years of your life and peace they increase for you. Goodness and reliability shall not leave you! Bind them about your neck! Write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will find favor and applause in the eyes of God and man. Trust in YHWH with all your heart, do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways recognize him: then he will smooth your paths. Be not wise in your eyes! Fear God and shun evil! (Prov 3:1–7).

Should this promise of happiness not come true, wisdom teachers present the motif of suffering as divine educational and testing actions. The question that arises in view of the suffering of the righteous – whether the wisdom tradition

¹⁷ Cf. Otto, "Monotheismus," 109–116.

¹⁸ JiSeong J. Kwon ("Instructions," 3–26) convincingly shows that in the chapters Prov 3; 6–7, direct reference is made to the *Shema' Israel* in Deuteronomy.

can convey the knowledge of good and evil that goes back to God and whether it holds a solution to the problem of theodicy in store – is critically reflected upon in Job's dialogues with his friends and ultimately brought to a conclusion by recourse to mythical traditions and the theology of creation as well as the reference to the lack of human knowledge in comparison to God's knowledge,¹⁹ but not resolved. The literary supplement of the Elihu speeches offers a solution by recourse to the older wisdom and the synthetic conception of life as the connection between deed and reward, which is presented as a foundation for ethics in order to prevent ethical libertinage. In contrast to this conservative recourse to the tradition of pre-exilic wisdom, the literary addendum to the Book of Job in Job 28 takes a different path, which productively takes up the upheavals of the post-exilic wisdom in comparison to that of the pre-exilic time in the form of a negative theology.²⁰ The human endeavor to distinguish between good and evil is compared to the image of a miner who digs into the depths of the mine in search of treasures. Even if he finds "treasures," he still does not find the wisdom of God. Here, traits of the epistemological borderline consciousness of wisdom are condensed into a negative theology:

"Wisdom, where is it to be found, where is the place of insight.

No man knows her estimation, she is not found in the land of the living" (Job 28:12–13)

None of the "precious things" that man finds can outweigh the wisdom of God, which is to say that it is incommensurable with all human insight:

"Wisdom, where does she come from, and where is the place of insight?

It is veiled from the eyes of all the living, hidden from the birds of the air...

God knows the way to it, only he knows its place" (Job 28:20–21, 23)

The wisdom of a divine knowledge of good and evil remains inaccessible and hidden from man. It is with God alone and no path of human empirical understanding of the world, especially of nature, which shows how to find some "precious insights," leads to the wisdom of God. If the divine knowledge of good and evil remains inaccessible and hidden from man, no ethics can be founded on it and ethical libertinage can take hold. The literary addition to Job 28 in Job 28:28 wants to prevent this and limit the negative theology in Job 28 in its ethical consequences:

"But to man he (sc. God) said:

Behold the fear of God, that is wisdom; the shunning of evil is understanding."

Through the insertion of the originally literarily independent chapter Job 28 into the Book of Job, the revelational-theological overcoming of negative theology implied in Job 28:28 is caught up, insofar as the speeches of God in Job 38–41 can be read as overcoming also the negative theology in Job 28, insofar as only a revelation of God is able to heal the aporia of negative theology, to give an answer to the question of theodicy and to give ethics a convincing foundation.

¹⁹ Cf. Keel, "Entgegnung," 51–159.

²⁰ For an analysis of Job 28, cf. Witte, *Leiden*, 162–165.

The authors of Job 28 and of the discourses on God in Job 38–41, as well as the redactors who introduced Job 28 into Job's dialogues with his friends and supplemented it with Job 28:28, take part in an intensive discourse in late Persian and early Hellenistic times about human access to God's wisdom and His knowledge of good and evil. The position of the authors of Job 28 is adopted and differentiated in the Book of Ecclesiastes.²¹ Within the framework of the large program section Ecc 1:3–3:22,²² the book begins with the insight of negative theology into man's inability to know God and thus to understand the world in its entirety: "I consider the toil which God has given to man to labor withal: all things has he made fitting for his hour, even the knowledge of the time afar off he has given to their understanding, without man knowing the work which God has created, from the beginning even unto the end" (Ecc 3:10–11).

The authors of Ecclesiastes go beyond Job 28 in that man certainly has a knowledge of the existence of God's wisdom, which is expressed in the appropriateness of everything created by YHWH, but beyond a "that" of existence, he cannot know anything about divine wisdom and cannot recognize it, as Job 28:24 already states: "For he (sc. God) looks to the ends of the earth, only he sees what is under the universe of heaven."

For Qohelet, there is a divine order in the world that makes everything that happens appropriate – man knows that. And yet he cannot recognize and understand the work of God in its totality. Only such knowledge would reveal to man the wisdom of God in the world. Job 28 and Ecclesiastes together contradict the revelational-theological speculation in the chapters Prov 1–9, and especially in Prov 8, and their overcoming of the negative theology of the early proverbs in Prov 10–27 which brings up God as the limit of wisdom.²³ Prov 8 takes the stand that man is given a knowledge of a pre-existent wisdom and with it a knowledge of the work of God in its totality through the revelation of God. Qohelet, on the other hand, argues dialectically. On the one hand, there is a knowledge that everything is appropriately made by God, on the other, there is the non-understanding of what is appropriate: "I consider the work of God in its entirety: for verily men cannot know the work that is done under the sun, because even when man labors to know it, yet he does not know it. And even if the wise man claims to know it, yet he cannot know it" (Ecc 8:17).

If the wisdom of God remains hidden from man, then for the authors of Ecclesiastes no standards qualifying the actions of man as good or bad can be traced back to YHWH, so that for Qohelet, as a way out of the negative theology of the *deus*

²¹ On the history of research in Ecclesiastes, cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 5–38.

²² On the literary structures in the Book of Ecclesiastes, cf. Backhaus, *Zeit*, 76–351; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Glück*, 5–6.

²³ On the critical encounter of the Book of Ecclesiastes with Prov 1–9, cf. Weeks, "Qohelet," 99–111.

absconditus and its fatal consequences for ethics, is a pragmatic-utilitarian justification of a minimal ethics.²⁴

The negative theology, which is formulated post-exilically in Job 28 and in the Book of Ecclesiastes, presupposes the assertion of monotheism, which is shown in Deut 4:35–40 as the hermeneutical key of the interpretation of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5 and of the *Sh' ma' Israel* in Deut 6, and brings the transcendence and non-worldliness of God into post-exilic wisdom, which already has a connecting point in a negative theology in early wisdom.²⁵

In the Book of Ben Sira, a reverse conclusion is drawn from this amalgamation of wisdom and Torah, and the negative theology in the Book of Ecclesiastes²⁶ is negated in terms of creation theology:²⁷ “He formed them mouth and tongue, eyes and ears, and gave them a heart to think, and filled them with understanding, and taught them to know good and evil” (Sir 17:6–7).

The continuation in Sir 17:12 shows that Ben Sira's departure from Kohelet's negative theology is creation-theologically based: “An everlasting covenant he (sc. God) has made with them and revealed commandments to them.”

In this discourse in the late post-exilic wisdom, the paradise narrative in Gen 2–3, a post-priestly, wisdom-influenced teaching narrative,²⁸ intervenes to develop a quite independent position in this discourse on negative theology. If, on the one hand, man's ability to know God and the ability to distinguish what is good and evil in the eyes of God is questioned in a negative theology and, on the other hand, this form of negative theology is negated by a theology of creation and overtaken by the revelation of this knowledge by God in the form of the Torah,²⁹ the paradise narrative in Gen 2–3 traces the knowledge of good and evil back to the transgression of God's commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Despite this divine command, man eats from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Gen 2, man had already been given the ability to pragmatically order his lifeworld, which was founded in the creation of man,³⁰ as the naming of the animals in connection with the sapiential list science shows.³¹ However, the moral judgment of what is good and what is evil

²⁴ Cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 172–173.

²⁵ On the post-exilic amalgamation of wisdom and Torah, cf. Otto, “Amalgamierung,” 173–188.

²⁶ On the literary relations between the books of Ecclesiastes and Ben Sira, cf. Marböck, “Kohelet,” 275–301. On the history and state of research on Ben Sira, cf. Reiterer, “Ben Sira,” 23–60.

²⁷ Cf. Beentjes, “Ben Sira,” 45–73.

²⁸ Cf. Otto, “Lehrerzählung,” 167–192; Schüle, *Prolog*, 150–177; Arneth, *Urgeschichte*, 97–147.

²⁹ Cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 257–263.

³⁰ On the sapiential motif of creation of the human being, cf. Doll, *Menschenschöpfung*, 15–39.

³¹ In Gen 2:7, 18–24, an older, originally literarily independent human creation narrative has been integrated into the post-exilic paradise-narrative in Gen 2:4–3:24; cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 61–64. It should be noted that a Syriac-Canaanite myth tradition as in *KTU* 1.107 and *KTU* 1.100 was received alongside the narrative in Gen 2:7, 18–24; cf. Korpel – de Moor, *Adam*, 5–88. The biblical paradise-narrative is not about the etiology of the mortality of man as a failed deity as in the Ugaritic incantations, but about an explanation of the

in the divine eyes is to be reserved for God, which the authors of the paradise narrative tie in with the negative theology in Job 28 and in the Book of Ecclesiastes. With the motif of the acquisition of this knowledge through the transgression of a divine prohibition, the narrators of the post-exilic teaching narrative tie in with Job 15:8, that man, listening to the counsel of God, has usurped the wisdom of God. In contrast to the traditional interpretation of the paradise narrative in Gen 2–3 as a narrative of the “fall of man” and punishment, it is a treatise on the freedom of decision granted by God to man to follow the prohibition or to transgress it and the consequences of this transgression. This presupposes that God withdraws in His omnipotence and grants man the freedom of decision. Freedom, however, is only given where and if one can fail in it, and so in the paradise narrative it must be told that man fails. Only failure constitutes, in a fully valid sense, the realization of the freedom of choice granted by God and allows the primeval event to become an interpretation of the *human condition* today.³² The reductions of the divine intentions of creation formulated in the curses in Gen 3:14–19 are understood as a *pretium libertatis* of the freedom granted by God to man and an answer to the problem of reductions in the divine creation of the world. In the post-exilic Torah, the monotheistic interpretation of the First Commandment in Deut 4 and of the Shema’ Israel in Deut 6 was enforced against their monolatrous-henotheistic interpretation, thus establishing God’s freedom in His transcendence and non-worldliness. In the post-exilic paradise-narrative in Gen 2–3, the withdrawal of the monotheistic God from the world in renouncing His omnipotence in a kind of *Zimzum* becomes the justification of man’s freedom in his knowledge of what is good and evil in the eyes of God. The justification of man’s freedom and his knowledge of good and evil, which has its starting point in the freedom of God and thus in negative theology, can, in turn, become its negation in ethics.

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ambivalences of human life as reductions of the divine intentions of creation, which the priestly scripture in Gen 1:1–2:3 considers as good.

³² Cf. Otto, “Urmensch,” 679–689.

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