Erich Unger’s “The Natural Order of Miracles”:
I. The Pentateuch and the Vitalistic Myth*

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Introduction
by E.J. Ehrman

The first decades of the twentieth century were highly creative, – James Joyce, Henri Bergson, Albert Einstein are but the first to come to mind. The young writer and thinker, Erich Unger, (Born 1887 in Berlin) found the intellectual climate highly congenial. His writings, whether on Nietzsche, on political theory or on Expressionism were admired and well received. In 1909, Unger and a number of friends founded the Expressionist ‘Neue Klub’, intended as a forum for his generation of young intellectuals, poets and artists. Their cultural impact has been documented by Richard Sheppard (Die Schriften des Neuen Klubs, 1908–14, Hildesheim, 1980,83).

Among the members of the ‘klub’ were two of Unger’s one time schoolfriends, Erwin Lowensohn and Edgar Zacharias. They were also members of a quartet of friends known as ‘the Great World Root’. The fourth, educated like them in the Greek and Latin tradition of the same High School, was Oskar Goldberg – a medical student, as was Zacharias. Goldberg came from an orthodox Jewish family and his Biblical and Talmudic studies gave him a far deeper insight into Judaism than was accessible to the other three. He taught them and converted them to orthodox Judaism. An authoritarian personality, Goldberg expected – and got – acceptance of his leadership and sworn loyalty. Unger’s literary talent and philosophical training served to articulate ideas about the Biblical text that were initially presented by the better informed Goldberg.

Unger’s essay, “The Natural Order of Miracles”, presented below, was written in the 1940s, but a number of its basic assumptions and perspectives date back to the 1920s. Goldberg was convinced that linguistic and anthropological research into the world of the Biblical text, its structure, ritual, beliefs and culture, would enable people to

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*Erich Unger’s Essay on Oskar Goldberg. Translated from the German original by E.J. Ehrman.
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understand the conditions necessary to bring about a renewed entry of the *shekhina*, the Divine presence, into the world. His work, *Die Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* (Berlin, 1925), presents that research.

Unger’s contribution to Goldberg’s thesis was an analysis of myth and its epistemological function. (Erich Unger *Wirklichkeit, Mythos, Erkenntnis*, Munchen and Berlin, 1940). Although Unger discusses the potential of myth as an instrument of cognition in a philosophical ‘science’, he distinguishes it from the contemporary ideas of Dacqué, Husserl, Heidegger and others. His analysis of empirical reality, myth and knowledge provide, as it were a philosophical foundation for Goldberg’s reading of the Biblical text. However, where Goldberg envisioned the possibility of a repeat revelation, Unger would, later, explore the possibility of an evolution of man’s consciousness and its quest for a renewed apprehension of the divine (Erich Unger *Das Lebendige und das Göttliche*, Jerusalem, 1966, posthumous).

Once more, the friends set up a forum for ideas, the ‘Philosophische Gruppe’. Papers were presented by academics and writers of every discipline, literature, mathematics, psychology, religion and political theory. Among its regulars were Professors such as Hans Reichenbach, Karl Korsch, Gottfried Salomon, poets such as Adrien Turel and Karl Theodor Bluth, writers such as Alfred Döblin’ Robert Musil and Walter Benjamin. Unger directed the evenings and both his and Goldberg’s ideas were discussed. Walter Benjamin was enthusiastic about Unger’s work and reported this to his friend, Gerhardt-Gerschom-Scholem (cf. Walter Benjamin, *Brieße*, ed G. Scholem and Th W. Adorno, Frankfurt am Main, 1966).

The advent of Hitler in 1933 put a stop to all this activity. Unger went to Paris and, some three years later, to England, where he died in 1950. Goldberg went to Prague and, some three years later, to the USA; he came back to Europe after the war and died in San Remo in 1952. The two friends parted company in 1937. Goldberg published a work called *Maimonides; Kritik der Jüdischen Glaubenslehre*, (Wien, 1935). In it, Goldberg attacks Maimonides as incompetent, lacking understanding and being responsible for the failure of Judaism. He attacks Judaism for its failure to link up with Islam to become a world religion and its failure to resist the distortions brought about by ‘Talmudists’. Unger disagreed with all of this. There was a quarrel and the two friends never exchanged another word for the rest of their lives. But Unger had signed a written promise always to cite Goldberg whenever he referred to the latter’s ideas. He kept this promise meticulously. His own thought was to develop their earlier ideas along different lines, but he remained most concerned that Goldberg’s originality should be recognized.

“*The Natural Order of Miracles*” is an essay on Oskar Goldberg’s thinking prior to his book on Maimonides. It was intended as a chapter in a History of Modern Jewish Philosophy that Unger was asked to write by the East and West Library. He did not live to complete that book.