

Linking Emotion, Cognition, and Action within a Social Frame: Old Testament Perspectives on Preaching the Fear of the LORD

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Abstract

Modern accounts of the meaning of “fear of the LORD” in the Hebrew Bible have tended to distance this important concept from the emotion of fear, offering alternative understandings as worship, obedience, or wisdom. This essay examines phrases such as “fear of the LORD,” “fear of God,” and “God-fearer,” across four sets of texts in the Hebrew Bible: 1) narratives in Genesis and Exodus; 2) Deuteronomy and other Deuteronomistic literature; 3) wisdom literature; and 4) Psalms. I argue that fear of the LORD/God in the Hebrew Bible typically does connote an emotional fear response that has in view divine power over life and death. The links between such fear and worship, and obedience, and wisdom that are attested in numerous biblical texts are not evidence of synonymy but a recognition of the fundamental link between emotion, cognition, and action. Recent developments in the study of emotion illuminate their interrelationship and the ways in which fear of the LORD/God is also socially shaped and shaping.

Modern biblical scholarship has frequently attempted to distance the concept of “fear of the LORD” in the Hebrew Bible from emotional experience in general and a response to threat of harm in particular.¹ Some have argued that “fear of the LORD” does not refer to what modern readers would understand as fear, but instead denotes reverence, piety, or worship. Others, noting the repeated linking of fear and wisdom in the Bible’s wisdom literature, have understood “fear of the LORD” to be a synonym for wisdom. And some have hypothesized that the phrase has multiple, distinct meanings, or that its meaning evolved over time, originally denoting an emotional fear response but later denoting an attitude of worship or a cognitive faculty of discernment.²

¹ In one recent example, *Phillip Michael Lasater* argues that “emotions” are not present in the Hebrew Bible, as they are a modern category, unknown prior to the eighteenth century CE (*Phillip Michael Lasater*, *The Emotions in Biblical Anthropology? A Genealogy and Case Study with yr’*, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 110, no. 4 [2017], 520–540). Using “fear” as a case study, he argues instead for an Aristotelean classification as a passion or affection. A key to *Lasater’s* argument is that fear in the Hebrew Bible “relates to rationality and intentionality, including at a behavioral level” (535). These links contradict the modern understanding of emotion that *Lasater* traces, in which emotion is understood as “non-cognitive and involuntary” (526). As I explain later in this article, my understanding of “fear” in the Hebrew Bible as primarily referring to an emotion relies on a different, complex understanding of emotion as affect that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century.

² I address examples of these approaches later in this essay. For a helpful summary see *Brent A. Strawn*, *The Iconography* [42]

By contrast with these approaches, I argue that the relationships between fear, worship, and wisdom in the Hebrew Bible are not due to synonymy, but a fundamental linking of emotion, cognition, and action. I challenge the idea of discrete technical meanings or semantic evolution by examining the theme of fear of the LORD across four sets of texts: 1) narratives in Genesis and Exodus; 2) Deuteronomistic literature; 3) wisdom literature; and 4) Psalms.³ I argue that across all four sets of texts, “fear of the LORD” is primarily an emotional response to and disposition cultivated in recognition of divine power over life and death.⁴ This fear is not synonymous with worship, obedience, or ethical behavior.⁵ Rather, it motivates them.⁶ Nor is fear synonymous with wisdom or knowledge. The wisdom literature repeatedly asserts the close interrelationship between emotion, cognition, and action, but does not confuse them.⁷ The interplay of emotion, cognition, and action is evident across all four sets of texts and is a key to understanding the function and importance of fear of the LORD in the Hebrew Bible.⁸

A brief discussion of lexical forms and frequency clarifies the Hebrew terminology that is the subject of this essay. A selective review of twentieth and twenty-first century studies of the meaning of “fear of the LORD” locates the present study in relation to existing debates. Analysis of “fear of the LORD” in the four sets of texts identified above then demonstrates the interplay of emotion,

of Fear: Yir’at YHWH in Artistic Perspective, in: Izaak J. de Hulster/Joel M. LeMon (eds.), *Image, Text, Exegesis. Iconographic Interpretation and the Hebrew Bible*, London / New York, 2014, 91–134, 94–96.

³ I use the adjective Deuteronomistic to mean “pertaining to Deuteronomy and material included within the so-called Deuteronomistic History.” The length of this article does not permit examining every part of the canon, nor will my consideration of these sections be exhaustive. I choose the narratives of Genesis and Exodus as a starting point because they challenge an overly systematic account of the phrase’s meaning or possible development, while also revealing key aspects of its social dimensions. Deuteronomistic literature, biblical wisdom literature, and Psalms are chosen for analysis because of the relatively higher concentration of references to “fear of the LORD” in these texts by comparison with other major groupings. If there were space to consider prophetic texts as well, key texts would include Isa 25:3, 29:13, 41:5, 50:10, 57:11, 59:19, 64:2; Jer 5:24, 10:7, 26:19, 32:39–40, 44:10–11; Hos 10:3; Amos 3:8; Joel 2:11, 31. It is noteworthy that fear is not a major concern of Ezekiel nor of the cultic/holiness material in Leviticus.

⁴ This fear thus may result from but does not presume direct encounter with the deity. On this point see the critique of *Jason A. Fout*, *What do I fear when I fear my God? A theological reexamination of a biblical theme*, in: *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2015), 23–38, 27–29.

⁵ For the interpretation of fear as obedience, see for example *Gerhard von Rad*, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin, London, 1972, 66: “In a few prominent passages it means simply obedience to the divine will [...]. The modern reader must, therefore, eliminate, in the case of the word ‘fear’, the idea of something emotional, of a specific, psychical form of the experience of God. In this context, the term is possibly used in a still more general, humane sense, akin to our ‘commitment to’ [...]”

⁶ *Matthew Schlimm* recognizes the complexity of the relation between fear and ethics in the Hebrew Bible, noting that “an important task of biblical ethics is to explain texts that describe fear so positively.” *Matthew Schlimm*, *The Central Role of Emotions in Biblical Theology, Biblical Ethics, and Popular Conceptions of the Bible*, in: F. Scott Spencer (ed.), *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions. Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature*, Atlanta (GA), 2017, 43–59, 53.

⁷ For interpretation of Job 28:28, a verse which does seem on the surface to equate fear with wisdom, see *David Clines*, “The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom’ (Job 28:28). A Semantic and Contextual study, in: Ellen van Wolde (ed.), *Job 28. Cognition in Context*, *Biblical Interpretation Series* 64, Leiden, 2003, 57–92, 73–75, 83. *Clines* interprets the verse in the light of Job 37:24, thus contextualizing the statement in relation to other wisdom teaching and interpreting the verse not as a grand epistemological claim but rather as a poetic statement that it is wise to fear the LORD.

⁸ The examination of “fear of the LORD” and related phrases in Psalms in this article will also highlight a specialized use of a substantive adjectival or participial form we might translate as “fearer” of God or the LORD. This specialized use will be shown to designate group belonging and promote social and religious conformity. It draws on the same matrix of associations, emotions, and motivations found in other literature of the Hebrew Bible examined herein.

cognition, and action in a wide range of texts where the concept “fear of the LORD” is present. This analysis also highlights social dimensions of fear of the LORD. After situating these findings in relation to modern (twentieth and twenty-first century) studies of emotion, I conclude by suggesting some implications of this analysis of fear of the LORD in the Hebrew Bible for the work of preaching today.

1. The Vocabulary of Fear

In the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew root most frequently translated “fear” is *y-r-*, attested in the verb *yārēʿ* (finite forms occur approximately 289 times), two adjectival or participial forms *nôrāʿ* (44 occurrences) and *yārēʿ* (45 occurrences), and the nouns *yirʾā* (45 occurrences) and *môrāʿ* (12 occurrences).⁹

Though not fear’s only object in the Hebrew Bible, the LORD / God is its most frequent object. The phrase “fear of the LORD” occurs thirty times in the Hebrew Bible, with two lexemes, *yirʾā* (23 x) and *paḥad* (7 x), commonly rendered by the English word “fear.”¹⁰ The expression “fear of God” occurs only five times in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹ Far more common than noun phrases are occurrences of the verb “to fear” with the LORD and/or God as its object and substantive participial/adjectival phrases referring to “fearers” of the LORD or God.¹²

The Hebrew Bible makes use of a broader lexicon of fear than the terms highlighted above, including words that can be translated as dread, terror, or panic, and trembling, shaking, and

⁹ Statistics from *Hans F. Fuhs*, *yārēʿ*, *yārēʿ*, *yirʾā*, *môrāʿ*, in: G. Johannes Botterweck/Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 6, Grand Rapids (MI), 1990, 209–315, 292–293. According to *Fuhs* the noun *yirʾā* is technically a “nominalized infinitive” (293).

¹⁰ *yirʾat*: 2Chron 19:9, Pss 19:10, 34:12, 111:10; Prov 1:7, 29, 2:5, 8:13, 9:10, 10:27, 14:26, 27, 15:16, 33, 16:6, 19:23, 22:4, 23:17, 31:30; Job 28:28 [*ʾadonay* instead of YHWH]; Isa 11:2,3, 33:6. *paḥad*: 1 Sam 11:7, 2Chron 14:13, 17:10, 19:7, Isa 2:10.19.21. “His fear” or “fear of him” (*yirʾatô*) occurs at Ex. 20:20. Note that in Gen 31:42, 53 God is named “the *paḥad* of Isaac.” While there is some debate about the meaning of this name, it may identify God metonymically by reference to the experience of terror. See *Emil Puech*, *Fear of Isaac*, in: David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, New York, 1992, 779–80, and *Matthias Köckert*, *Fear of Isaac*, in: Karel van der Toorn/Pieter Willem van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, Leiden, 1995, 622–627. Puech argues that fear is “a principal attribute of the God of Isaac, whose protective power sows terror among all his enemies” (780).

¹¹ *yirʾat ʾēlōhîm*: Gen 20:11, 2Sam 23:3, Neh 5:15; *paḥad ʾēlōhîm*: 2Chron 20:29, Ps 36:2 MT. 2Chron 26:5 may merit inclusion in this list, although it is textually uncertain: *birʾot hā ʾēlōhîm* is variously translated “visions of God” (NJPS) and “fear of God” (NRSV).

¹² By my counting I arrive at the following occurrences: Finite or infinitive verb fear (*yārēʿ*) with the LORD as explicit object occurs 25 x; Elohim 20 x; the LORD Elohim (frequently possessive, “your/their god”) 19 x; God or God’s action represented as pronominal or implied object approximately 41 x; God’s word or command 4 x; God’s name 4 x (in one of these occurrences the verb has two direct objects, name and glory). By this reckoning God or God’s attribute or command is object 113 times. (In five occurrences “other gods” are the object.) Verbal adjective fearer/fearing with LORD as explicit object occurs 14 x; Elohim as object 6 x; God represented as pronominal or implied object 18 x; God’s name as object 2 x, yielding 40 occurrences total. God is easily the most frequent object of fear. *Fuhs* (note 9) states that “in almost 80 percent of the passages, the object of fear is God” (296), although my math does not bear that out (see also *Clines* [note 7], 62). The next most common type of usage is in the injunction *not* to fear (*Fuhs* [note 9], 296, counts 75 occurrences of the expression *ʾal tîrāʿ* alone, and thus must not be including these in the total of which God is the object 80% of the time), grounded in divine power, protection, and ability and will to save. These uses are related.

writhing.¹³ In some instances collocations of such forms with references to fear of the LORD can clarify the types of emotional and physical responses envisioned by biblical writers, thereby helping us to better understand the concept's meaning.

2. Debating the Meaning of Fear of the LORD

In 1955, Robert Henry Pfeiffer famously wrote that “fear of God” “may be the earliest term for religion in biblical Hebrew.”¹⁴ While Pfeiffer emphasized the terror this phrase was meant to connote for ancient audiences, his contemporaries were eager to strip such a prominent biblical concept of its frightening connotations.¹⁵ Sanitized interpretations migrated well outside of biblical studies. For example, in 1969, in defense of including religious education in public school curricula, a scholar writing in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* cited the well-known statement from Proverbs that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” He asserted that “the expression ‘the fear of the LORD’ is a semi-technical term meaning religion,” such that the proverb teaches that “the heart of wisdom is religion.”¹⁶ For the writer, fear thus understood has nothing to do with the *emotion* fear and, thus unmoored from its lexical meaning, could be generalized to apply to any world religion.

But many preachers have been taught in seminary to be more careful in their lexical work, consulting theological dictionaries to analyze keywords in the passages they will preach on. Hans Fuhs, author of the widely read and cited *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* article on the root *y-r-*,¹⁷ there asserts that biblical Hebrew shows evidence of “a semantic evolution in the fear of God: when the element of literal fear recedes, ‘fear of God’ becomes tantamount to ‘religion’ or ‘spirituality; i.e., fear of God becomes synonymous with reverence, worship, and obedience to God’s command.”¹⁷ Fuhs argues that this evolved meaning appears in Deuteronomy and

¹³ These include forms derived from the roots *g-w-r*, *h-w-l*, *h-r-d*, *‘-r-š*, *h-t-t*, *s-‘-r*, *š-t-‘*, *b-‘-t*, *š-r-‘*, *‘-y-m*, and more.

¹⁴ Robert Henry Pfeiffer, *The Fear of God*, in: *Israel Exploration Journal* 5 (1955), 41–48, 41. Pfeiffer emphasized the genuine fear involved in biblical ideas of fearing the LORD, but concluded his essay by asserting that the prophetic reformers (Amos, second Isaiah, et al.) effected a shift in Israelite religious sensibilities away from God the “despot” and toward God the (loving) “father” who seeks not sacrifice but virtue (48). This developmental view of Israelite religion has since been shown to be greatly inaccurate.

¹⁵ This effort should be situated in the context of developments in theology, psychology, and popular culture among Europeans and white Americans following World War II that sought to present a more optimistic vision of human life and relationship with God. Examples include the theological writing of Paul Tillich, the demythologizing New Testament interpretation of Rudolf Bultmann, and the popular self-help writing of Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power of Positive Thinking*, 1952) and Thomas Anthony Harris (*I’m OK – You’re OK*, New York, 1967, which was influenced by Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, New York, 1948 and *Idem*, *The New Being*, New York, 1955). These developments were memorably critiqued in Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic. Uses of Faith after Freud*, New York, 1966, and Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* New York, 1973.

¹⁶ Atfield, D. G., “The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom”: A Defence of Religious Education in County Schools, in: *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 17, no. 3 (1969), 249–61.

¹⁷ Fuhs (note 9), 298.

Deuteronomistic literature, where it means “to worship Yahweh faithfully as the covenant God,” with an almost exclusively “cultic sense (‘fear’ = ‘worship’).”¹⁸ Fuhs finds similar meanings (e.g., cultic devotion, faithfulness, worship) governing usage in Psalms and a broad range of other texts.¹⁹ For Fuhs its meaning in the Wisdom traditions is more complex and varied, but he seems to summarize it as “knowledge of Yahweh and dependence on him.”²⁰ In a similar vein, Tremper Longman suggests that in wisdom literature the phrase “sometimes functions as a close synonym of wisdom.”²¹

The idea that we could, semantically speaking, replace “fear” with “piety,” “devotion,” or “worship” was taught to me in graduate school in the late 1990s.²² I taught it to a batch of divinity students in the aughts. It felt like a righteous blow in the war against supersessionist interpretation of the Old Testament to be able to say to students, you thought the Hebrew Bible was scary, but it’s not. There’s no fear to fear here, only reverence and religion.²³ But this uncomplicated and less threatening substitution did not do justice to the evidence of the Hebrew scriptures.

In recent years, two scholars have pushed back on the predominant interpretation that fear of God is not really a matter of emotion. David Clines employs cognitive linguistic analysis to argue against the semantic-evolution hypothesis and instead proposes that “the [y-r-ʔ] word-group always signifies the emotion of fear.” In his analysis of non-theological uses of the term “fear,” he observes that the occasion for fear is commonly a situation that may lead to death.²⁴ In a similar vein, rather than viewing “fear” as a *synonym* for ethical behavior, Clines traces within many biblical texts a *causative* relationship between fear of punishment and the choice to behave ethically.²⁵ Brent Strawn has similarly challenged the hypothesis of evolution or development, noting the great difficulty of establishing chronology for the texts in question. By pairing iconographic and textual evidence, Strawn argues that “the fear of the Lord [...] is shown to be predicated on God’s power and the

¹⁸ Ibid., 308.

¹⁹ Ibid., 308–309.

²⁰ Ibid., 311.

²¹ *Tremper Longman III*, *Fear of the Lord*, in: idem/Peter Enns (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, Downers Grove (IL), 2008, 201–205, 202.

²² A concise and helpful summary of major scholarly treatments of the theme of fear of the LORD can be found in *Ettienne Ellis*, *Reconsidering the Fear of God in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Rudolf Otto’s Das Heilige*, in: *Old Testament Essays*, 27, no. 1 (2014), 82–99. *Ellis* is particularly interested to document the influence of Rudolf Otto’s idea of “the Holy” as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in order to open space for interpretations that do not prejudge the evidence on the basis of *Otto’s* theory.

²³ *Longman* (note 21), 201, wants to avoid connotations of “unhealthy dread”. Elsewhere he writes, “the word respect seems much too weak and horror, dread, or terror much too strong” (*The Fear of God in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, in: *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25, no. 1 (2015), 13–21, 14). An exception for *Longman* is *Qohelet*, who urges his readers to fear God, not in this sense of humble reverence, but in the sense of an attitude that would lead one to keep one’s distance and not stir up God’s anger.

²⁴ *Clines* (note 7), 60.

²⁵ Ibid., 64. I largely agree with *Clines’* analysis, with the exception of *Clines’* assertion that fear is a mental state rather than a physical experience. Studies of affect and emotion have now established that emotions such as fear entail a complex interweaving of cognitive and physical processes. I thus do not agree with *Clines’* exclusion from the semantic field of *yir’á* terms that describe “physiological symptoms” (67, 69).

threat that power poses [...]”; God is simultaneously life-giving and “death-dealing.”²⁶ Across a broad range of contexts, fear of the LORD recognizes that human life hangs in the balance. In the analysis that follows I will build on the arguments of Clines and Strawn while offering further insights into the interrelation of emotion, cognition, and action in biblical portrayals of “fear of the LORD.” I will also attend to ways that fear of the LORD both is socially shaped and shapes relationships and social structures.

3. Narratives in Genesis and Exodus

Narratives in Genesis and Exodus associate fearing God with behaviors ranging from avoidance to hospitality, radical obedience, and clemency. Fearing God is viewed as a predictor of integrity. It is also a response to theophany. These narratives do not present a systematic concept of fear but help us begin to map its complexity, noting in particular fear’s close relationship to human behavior and its shaping effects on relationships and social structures.

The first instance (canonically speaking) of ‘fear’ in biblical narrative is closely linked with shame elicited by human vulnerability and particularity. Adam claims that he heard God in the garden, was afraid, and hid, because he was naked (Gen 3:10). While God is not the explicit object of fear, Adam’s fear results in avoidant behavior, such that he hides from God at the very moment that God seeks encounter with the humans God has made.²⁷

Later, the men of Abimelech’s household respond with fear when they learn that God has promised that their lives will be forfeit if Sarah is not restored to Abraham (20:8). Though the fuller phrase “fear [of] God” or “fear [of] the LORD” is not used here, the context clarifies that they fear God’s explicit threat of imminent death. Abraham, however, rationalizes that he deceived Abimelech because he says he thought that “there [was] no fear of God in this place” and for that reason its inhabitants would be likely to murder him in order to seize his wife for their own (v. 11; cf. Deut 25:18, Ps 55:19–20).²⁸ For Abraham, fear of God correlates with lawful behavior, in this instance hospitality toward and safe passage of strangers.

In the well-known tale of the binding of Isaac, God stays the hand of Abraham, declaring, “now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen 22:12 NRSV). Here God finds evidence of Abraham’s fear of God in Abraham’s willingness to slaughter his own son in obedience to God’s command.

²⁶ *Strawn* (note 2), 112–113.127.

²⁷ *Daniel Castelo*, *The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method*, in: *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (2008), 147–160 uses this example to describe an (inappropriate) “Adamic fear” which he contrasts with (proper) “Mosaic fear.” I resist what I perceive to be an overly tidy and systematizing account of two types of fear responses to God in the Hebrew scriptures, but affirm *Castelo*’s linking of this instance of fear with a condition of alienation.

²⁸ Where a version is not specified, translations from the biblical text are the author’s own.

In Gen 42, Joseph, formerly sold by his brothers into slavery and now in a position of power among the Egyptians, responds to his brothers' petition for freedom and survival. This scene and the one after it is fraught for the brothers, for whom lives are at stake beyond their own (see esp. vv. 36–38). The brothers describe a movement of distress or anguish from Joseph (in the past) to themselves (in the present) (v. 21). Despite their past abuse of him, he tells his brothers: “Do this and you shall live, for I am a fearer of God” (Gen 42:18). Joseph has named his own fear of God as a powerful counterbalance that will prevent him from committing acts of injustice and violence toward the men he has imprisoned and to whom he offers a conditional freedom. This fear of God competes with a memory of past injury that has transferred a trauma from victim to abusers and risks turning a past victim into an abuser too (vv. 22,24).

As in Genesis, so in Exodus, fear of God is viewed as a predictor of integrity; it is also a response to theophany and motivator of obedience. In both cases, fear plays a role in shaping social and political relationships and structures, a role which will also be observed in Deuteronomic literature, wisdom literature, and Psalms.²⁹

Ex 18 provides a kind of template for political and judicial leadership among God's people. Up until this moment, Moses has apparently been attempting to render rulings for the people on his own. He is now instructed to select captains (chiefs of thousands, fifties, and tens) who will judge alongside him. They should be “fearers of God,” “men of truth,” “haters of profit”: that is, the attitude or disposition of fearing God is here presented as a predictor of honesty and integrity, preventing individuals from seeking their own gain at others' expense (Ex 18:21).

Fear is also a prominent motif in relation to theophany. While the motif is introduced in Moses's response to God's first self-revelation to Moses (Moses hides his face, fearing to look at God, Ex 3:6), it is more fully developed in the narrative of the Sinai theophany (Ex 20). At Sinai, when the Israelites experience the thunder, lightning, blare, and smoke that accompany God's presence, they respond fearfully, physically trembling (Ex 20:18), and ask Moses to prevent God from speaking to them, lest they die (v. 19).³⁰ Moses responds paradoxically that they should not fear, because God is testing them so that “fear [of God]” will be “upon your faces [...] so that you do not sin” (v. 20).

In this passage (Ex 20), multiple connotations of ‘fear’ intersect. The first connotation is the emotional (including physical) fear response. Thunder, lightning, loud noise, and a smoking mountain each may elicit fear responses in humans due to learned associations: they are signs

²⁹ On social and cultural dimensions of affect/emotion, see *Sara Ahmed*, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, 2004. *Ahmed* argues that emotion is a form of “world making” (12). *Jennifer L. Koosed* applies *Ahmed's* work on emotion to an analysis of the Israelites' fear response to Moses's face in Ex 34:30 in *Moses: The Face of Fear*, in: *Biblical Interpretation* 22 (2014), 414–429.

³⁰ In 20:18, most ancient versions state that the people “feared”; MT, however, states that the people “saw”. The physical response of tottering, waving, or trembling is reported in MT as well as other ancient versions.

accessible to senses of sight, sound, vibration, smell, and taste of deadly natural events and forces, including lightning, fire, avalanche, and volcano. Beyond the “natural” dangers these signs may accompany and foretell, the people deduce that in this instance these are also signs of God’s dangerous presence. They fear that a more direct encounter with the deity will end in their death. The second connotation of ‘fear’ in this passage is a lasting disposition that shapes behavior. This dual, intersecting meaning accounts for Moses’s seemingly paradoxical instruction in 20:20, cited above. The instruction seems to say, do not fear for your life right now. God wills your present and future well-being. But from this moment, let the fear of God be a deterrent to sin and an inducement to obedience.³¹ The connection here between fear of God and obedience or righteousness is explicit: fear of God is meant to discourage sin. But the reader should not imagine that this second connotation of fear, as a disposition that shapes behavior, has no connection to the first, an emotional and physical fear response to the threat of death or harm. The case law that follows clarifies that fear of death remains in view: in the subsequent chapter (ch. 21), the death penalty is prescribed for at least five different crimes.

4. Deuteronomic Literature

Here I consider passages from three Deuteronomic books: Deuteronomy, 1Samuel, and 2Kings. Consistent with Genesis and Exodus, Deuteronomic writers recognize fear as a response to theophany and a motivator of obedience. For the Deuteronomists, fear also motivates worship. Deuteronomy strengthens the explicit linking of emotion, cognition, and action in its treatment of fear of the LORD by introducing the motor metaphor of walking. Deuteronomy also contributes new ideas: people must *learn* to fear the LORD, and fear of the LORD is meant to forestall pride. First Samuel reinforces the links between fear, obedience, worship, and death, while 2Kings demonstrates that the relationship between fear and worship is not synonymous but causative and evidentiary. Each book further highlights social and even political effects of fear of the LORD.

In Deut 4, Moses reminds the people of their encounter with God at Horeb (cf. Ex 20), quoting God’s earlier instruction to him as follows: “assemble the people for me and I will cause them to hear my words, so that they will learn to fear me, all the days that they live on the earth, and they will teach their children” (Deut 4:10). In this passage, fear of God is acquired by two means: For some, it is instilled by the learned association, formed through direct experience, between God’s words and the blazing mountain and cloud of smoke (v. 11).³² For those who lack this direct

³¹ For *Fout* (note 4, 31), “Moses is correcting the Israelites, saying that they are not simply to be overawed or (to read in somewhat) paralyzed by fear of God’s impressive presence, but rather are to have the kind of fear that will result in following the Law just given, to do what is right and not sin”. The exhortation to let fear be upon their faces may be linked to *Abmed’s* (note 29, 6–7) treatment of the “impression” formed by contact with an object, which shapes both emotion and the orientation to the object.

³² Moses later confirms that the people “were afraid of the fire” to such a degree that they entrusted all mediation to

experience, it is instilled by parental catechesis (v. 10). This learned fear is intended to be a life-long motivator of covenant obedience, as spelled out in the remainder of the book.³³ “Fear me” is closely linked to “keep[ing] my commandments,” and carries with it a promised reward of prosperity and long life for self and descendants (5:29, 6:2,24). Fearing the LORD is necessary for welfare (*tôv*/good) and for staying alive (6:24).

Deut 6, 8, 10, and 13 intensify the link between the emotion “fear” and attendant action (such as keeping commandments) by means of a repeated motor metaphor of walking. The commandment in Deut 6:13, “The LORD your God you shall fear, and [the LORD] you will serve, and by [the LORD’s] name you will swear,” precedes a prohibition of walking after other gods. That is, only God’s power is to be feared and only God is to be served/worshiped or “walked after.” The penalty for walking after other gods is destruction/death (v. 15). In Deut 8:6 fear of the LORD occurs in parallel to walking in God’s ways, highlighting the pairing of disposition or emotion and action as two necessary components for keeping God’s commands. In ch. 10, fearing “the LORD your God” is presented within a summation of what God asks of God’s people, along with walking, loving, and serving/worshipping with heart and throat (*nepeš* 10:12). The conjoining of emotions, actions, and embodiment (heart and throat) suggests that the terms fearing and walking, loving, and serving/worshipping are not meant to be synonymous but rather to complement one another. The next verse links all of these with keeping the commandments and with the motivator “for your good” (10:13).

As in Exodus, so in Deuteronomy, the linking of fear and right conduct is motivated in part by the threat of death.³⁴ At 13:5 Moses commands: “after the LORD your God you shall walk, and [the LORD] fear, and [the LORD’s] commandments keep, and [the LORD’s] voice hear/obey, and [the LORD] serve/worship, and to [the LORD] cleave.” The context for this instruction is a warning regarding prophets and diviners who would encourage the people to follow other gods. In this broader context, while the instruction to walk, fear, keep, hear, and cleave is not accompanied by an explicit motivation-clause, fear is nonetheless portrayed as an inducement to obedience. To this end, three subsequent verses (6, 10, and 11) add that those prophets or diviners who would lead people away from God should be killed by the community, specifically by stoning (v. 11).

Moses (5:5).

³³ In Deut 31 the people (men, women, children, immigrants) will learn to fear the LORD God and “to keep to do all the words of the teaching” by assembling to hear (31:12). Like Deut 4, ch. 31 foregrounds the need for children to learn to fear the LORD God (v. 13). The pairing of fearing and “keep[ing] to do” emphasizes that fear is meant to be a learned, lifelong disposition that produces consistency and conformity of behavior.

³⁴ On fear of God as a “dread or anxiety that God, who is seen as the ultimate power, threatens, destroys, or kills people,” see *Pieter de Villiers*, *Fear as Dread of a God Who Kills and Abuses? About a Darker Side of a Key, but Still Forgotten Biblical Motif*, in: HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies 69.1 (2013), Art. #2018, 3. *De Villiers* cautions that biblical texts that project or construct this type of fear of God may “create space for violence and abuse” (7).

Communal enforcement of the death penalty is here explicitly intended to generate fear that will deter others from engaging in the forbidden behavior (v. 12): “and all Israel will hear and fear and will not again do this evil thing in your midst.” Through repetition of the key word “fear,” the disposition of “fear [of]the LORD your God” (v. 3) is closely linked with fear for one’s life (v. 11; likely also for the lives of loved ones, cf. v. 6) that is felt in response to learning that such a thing has occurred (v. 11). The prescribed human act of stoning, which implicitly mimics, enacts, and participates in divine power over life and death, here aims to elicit obedience to God’s commands.

The phrase, “and all [...] will hear and fear and will not again do [...],” which marked the conclusion to the instruction regarding prophets and diviners examined above, is repeated with minor variation in three other passages in Deuteronomy, regarding obedience to (levitical) priests and judges (17:13), jeopardy for witnesses (19:20), and rebellious children (21:21) respectively. While these three examples do not explicitly refer to “fear of the LORD,” they illustrate the close linking of fear, obedience, and the threat of death or harm within the book of Deuteronomy. In Deut 13:8–13, a death penalty is meant to instill fear that will elicit precise and unswerving obedience to the rulings of Levitical priests and judges: “And whoever acts in pride, by disobeying the priest whose office is to minister there to the LORD your God, or [by disobeying] the judge, that person must die” (17:12). In this case, fear of death motivates obedience by curbing prideful overconfidence in one’s own judgment rather than that of the appointed priests and judges. In Deut 19:15–21, a broader *lex talionis* that includes the possibility of death (“Do not have pity: neck for neck, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” v. 21) is meant to generate fear that will in turn deter individuals from falsely accusing others. While these two examples reinforce structures of authority and justice within the wider community, a similar deterrent reinforces the authority of parents over their children, situating their authority in relation to that of local elders and making the stoning of one rebellious child an occasion for fear throughout Israel (21:18–21).

The preceding three examples linked fear of death or harm with obedience in order to reinforce the authority of local priests, judges, elders, and parents and to ensure the integrity of the judicial system. Deuteronomy also takes care to ensure that, if over time the structure of government changes to that of monarchy, the king will not place himself above those he governs or “turn aside from the commandment” (17:14–20, v. 20). The king must instead learn to “fear the LORD his God” by writing a copy of the law, keeping it with him, and reading it out loud every day (vv. 19–20).³⁵ In this passage fear of the LORD is meant to shape perceptions of self in relation to others and to shape behavior. The king’s learned fear aims to deter presumption and pride that would

³⁵ Fear is also learned by eating in God’s presence (14:23). In this passage, it is less clear how the action would instill or relate to the emotion of fear. The passage elsewhere associates the event with desire and rejoicing (v. 26). The meal seems intended to be a celebration, including grain, wine, oil, and meat. The seeming contradiction may further complicate the picture that has developed up to this point.

induce him to veer to one side or another, making his own judgments and adjustments rather than adhering to God's teaching (17:20; cf. 17:13). As elsewhere, the fear of the LORD will lead to longevity, in this case to lasting rule and a dynasty (v. 20). Together, the examples in Deut 13, 17, 19, and 21 underscore not only the relationship between cognition (learning, evaluating, and decision-making), emotion (fear) and action (behavior, including obedience, worship, and upholding the law), but also the complex ways in which fear is socially shaped and socially shaping.

The threat of harm and death articulated in 6:15, 13:6, 10, and 11, 17:12, and 19:21 haunts other Deuteronomic passages. In Deuteronomy, the Name of God functions as a hypostasis that represents and/or mediates divine power, presence, and protection.³⁶ It is not only God who must be feared but also the Name, on pain of death and grievous calamity: "Unless you keep, to do (them), all the words of this teaching, which are written in this scroll, to fear this Name that is honored and feared, the LORD your God, the LORD will 'miracle' [*wēhīplā'*]³⁷ you with blows, your offspring with blows, blows great and constant and sicknesses evil and constant" (28:58–59).³⁷ Implicitly, through use of the verbal root *p-l-ʿ*, God promises to turn "wonders," which have previously been the means of Israel's liberation (cf. Judg 6:13), into the means of their destruction, now generating faith and fear not through acts of redemption, grace, and mercy but by striking, wounding, and devastating the people.³⁸

First Samuel further illustrates the link between fear, obedience, and death. In his farewell address, Samuel frames the people's choice to have a king on earth within the context of their broader history with the LORD. Their future will be secure if they "fear and serve the LORD," obey and do not rebel, and if people and king alike follow the LORD (1Sam 12:14). Samuel summons unnatural thunder and rain in the midst of harvest heat to demonstrate that the people's request for a king is evil in the LORD's eyes (vv. 17–18), with the result that the people "feared the LORD and Samuel" (v. 18) and begged the prophet to intercede to save their lives (v. 19). In a seeming paradox similar to that of Ex 20:20, Samuel's response to the people includes the exhortation "do not fear" and the command "fear." Samuel responds to their immediate fear of death by enjoining them to serve God alone (v. 20) and ignore "gods who are nothing" (v. 21). That is, their choices in this moment and in the future will determine their fate. At the conclusion of his speech he again

³⁶ See *Benjamin Sommer*, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, Cambridge, 2009, 59, drawing on the widely cited but unpublished study by *S. Dean McBride*, *The Deuteronomic Name Theology*, PhD. Diss., Harvard University, 1969.

³⁷ The word "constant" renders the niphil participles *ne'ēmānôt* and *ne'ēmānîm*, from the root ²*m-n*, "to believe." The participles might also be translated "believed," "believable," "to be believed," or "that have been believed." In more idiomatic English, "blows you'd better believe," or "blows that will make you believe."

³⁸ When we create logic pretzels to sanitize the biblical connotations of fear of God we fail to recognize the brutality that is sometimes explicit and often implicit within this biblical concept. When law-enforcers, parents, spouses, teachers, or church leaders refer to "putting the fear of God in" someone, they are hewing rather closely to the explicit threat of violence in this passage.

reiterates the double command to “fear and serve the LORD,” adding the modifiers “in truth, with your whole heart” (v. 24). If they do not fear and serve, they will do evil and be “swept away” (v. 25). Throughout this passage fear of the Lord is linked to actions including service, obedience, and exclusive worship; it is motivated by explicit fear and threat of death.

Finally, a passage in 2Kings 17:24–41 focuses on the difficulty of foreign peoples’ learning to fear the LORD. In this passage, eleven-fold repetition of the verb “to fear” signals that fear of the LORD is its central, thematic focus. The narrator of 2Kings reports that when, after Israel’s exile, people from Babylonia, Cutha, ‘Avva, Ḥamath and Sepharvayim (17:24) were first settled in the region of Samaria, “they did not fear the LORD” (v. 25; NRSV and NJPS both here translate “fear” as “worship”). Consequently, the LORD sent lions to kill them (v. 25). Numerous texts examined thus far have warned that failure to fear the LORD will result in calamitous death. This passage, by contrast, narrates such a consequence as having already occurred.

This chain of cause and effect, by which failure to fear LORD results in death, is reported to the king of Assyria, but with a variation: a different phrase is used to explain the cause of the settlers’ deaths. The report that the Assyrian king receives does not state that the settlers “did not fear the LORD,” but instead states that the settlers are being killed by lions because “they did not know the god’s *mišpaṭ*,” i.e., judgment, ruling, or justice (v. 26).³⁹ This substitution charts a close connection, perceived by the emissaries to the king, between fear of the LORD and cognition, whether a recognition of broader divine governing principles of cause and effect or knowledge of specific commands and consequences attributed to this god. On hearing this report, the king responds that priests should be sent to teach the god’s justice (*mišpaṭ*, v. 27, curiously translated by the noun “worship” in this verse by NAB). A priest is accordingly sent to Bethel, where he teaches the settlers “how they should fear the LORD” (v. 28).

As the narrative unfolds, despite the intervention of the priest at Bethel, the settlers continue to “make gods,” set up shrines to other deities, and pass children through fire. They also feared the Lord (v. 32). “They were fearing the LORD and serving their gods according to the judgment/ruling [*mišpaṭ*] of the nations they had been exiled from” (v. 33). Within the framework of Deuteronomic theology examined above, the juxtaposition of fearing the LORD and serving other gods presents an implicit contradiction (cf. Deut 6:13-15). That contradiction is made explicit in the verse that follows: “to this day they are acting according to the former judgments/rulings [i.e., the ones they had known before they came to Samaria]. They were not fearing the LORD and they were not acting according to the statutes and rulings and teaching and commandment which the LORD commanded the children of Jacob ...” (v. 34). The narrator then summarizes part of God’s covenant with the

³⁹ “the god’s justice” rather than “the LORD’s justice” because, as far as the king of Assyria is concerned, the LORD is one local deity among many.

Israelites with the commands: “you shall not fear other gods, or bow down to them, or serve them, or sacrifice to them” (v. 35), but fear, bow, and sacrifice only to the LORD, whose great strength and outstretched arm delivered them from Egypt (v. 36). They are then instructed to “keep to do” the statutes, judgments, teaching, and command written by God for them, and not to fear other gods (v. 37; cf. Deut 31:12). The latter phrase is repeated in the next verse (v. 38), followed again by the command to fear the LORD, who would deliver them from enemies (v. 39). Despite this intervention and instruction, the pattern of foreign settlers’ fearing the LORD and serving other gods nonetheless persisted (v. 41).

This passage (2Kings 17:24–41) appears to have the densest repetition of the motif of fearing the LORD within the Hebrew Bible (11 occurrences in a span of 17 consecutive verses). The writer here parses behavior that contradicts fearing the LORD primarily in terms of non-Yahwistic cultic practices. That is, fear is to be manifested in the choice of whom and how to worship. The relationship between fear and worship is not here synonymous but causative and, in theory, evidentiary. That is, fear is here presented as motivation for worship practices, while worship practices are viewed as evidence of fear when done correctly and evidence of the lack or misplacement of fear when done incorrectly, as in the worship of deities besides the LORD. Moreover, for this writer, fear should motivate not only obedience to commandments related to worship, but also adherence to the entirety of the law and justice of God. Yet the narrative also emphasizes the importance of communal memory and formation in shaping such fear and the behavior that would or “should” follow from it.⁴⁰ The narrative illustrates that in the absence of the direct revelation and/or lengthy, even lifelong catechesis envisioned in Deut 4:10 (and in the presence of alternative cultural catechesis), fear – even fear of death – has unpredictable results.

5. Wisdom Literature⁴¹

Among the wisdom books, Proverbs is generally viewed as articulating an empirically grounded and orthodox wisdom perspective, with Job and Qohelet challenging and disrupting Proverbs’ overly tidy worldview and instruction on the basis of contrary evidence. The frequent use of the noun phrase “fear of the LORD” as well as verbal commands to fear the LORD in Proverbs have similarly come to represent a certain comfortable orthodoxy regarding the phrase’s meaning, that fear is not fearing but knowing, not terror but wisdom. I argue that, rather than negating the word’s emotional meaning, Proverbs locates fear within a wider matrix of strong emotions that include

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ahmed* (note 29), 7, 45–46, 69.

⁴¹ I do not treat here Qohelet due to considerations of the length of this article. On fear in Qohelet, see *Longman* (note 21), Fear of God in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

hatred, despising, and envy. Like the Deuteronomist(s), the sages recognize the strong link between emotion, cognition, and action.

The book's introduction describes "the fear of the LORD" as "the beginning of knowledge," contrasting this disposition with that of fools who despise instruction (Prov 1:7; cf. 9:10–18; see also 13:13). In this verse, the affective experience of fear is counterposed to the emotion of despising. The latter has negative consequences: Scoffers and fools who have ignored wisdom's teaching (vv. 22–25) will experience destruction (v. 32) "because they *hated* knowledge and did not choose the *fear* of the LORD" (v. 29; note again the affective contrast).

The book's addressee, by contrast, is urged to seek wisdom, and thereby "understand the fear of the LORD and [...] find knowledge of God" (2:5). This parallelism between fear and knowledge is not synonymous. A few verses later the addressee is offered understanding of "righteousness and justice and equity, every good path" (2:9 NRSV). This parallelistic progression highlights causal connections between fear, knowledge, and action. The knowledge here prescribed includes consequences for actions: the upright will abide in the land [...] and the wicked will be cut off" (vv. 21–22). With these dichotomous fates in view, the addressee is urged to keep commandments that lead to life (3:1–2), and to trust in received teaching above personal insight (v. 5): "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil" (v. 7; cf. 14:16, 16:6). This disposition is paired with openness to divine correction (v. 11), a path that leads to healing, life, wealth, and honor (vv. 8, 16, 35; see also 14:26–27; 22:4).⁴²

While Prov 1 highlighted a contrast between affective states of fearing and despising, in ch. 8 Wisdom yokes them together: to fear God is also to hate evil, and mirrors Wisdom's own declared hatred of "pride, arrogance, the road of evil, and twisted speech" (8:13). Later, Proverbs again emphasizes the contrast between fearing and despising, asserting that "one who walks straight fears the LORD, and the one whose roads are crooked despises [the LORD]" (14:2). That is, conduct provides evidence of attitude and affective state. Fear of the LORD is matched by an affective opposite, despising the LORD (cf. 15:32: "they despise themselves"). Social and political dimensions of fear of the LORD are emphasized in the instruction to the book's audience to "fear the LORD and the king" while distancing themselves from "haters" (24:21).

Elsewhere, fear of the LORD is counterposed to a different emotion: envy. "Let not your heart be jealous of sinners, but only fear of the LORD all your days" (23:17; translation preserves ambiguous syntax). That is, desire should not extend to the apparent material prosperity of sinners. Fear of God ought to clarify that such envy is misplaced, because God is able to cut off their

⁴² Cf. 15:33: "The fear of the LORD is wisdom's correction, and humility precedes honor." The sages acknowledge that fear doesn't always generate prosperity. But even in the absence of riches and honor, "a little with fear of the LORD" is better than wealth that brings sorrow (15:16; cf. 16:8).

prosperity in an instant. It is the person characterized by fear of the LORD who should be praised (31:30). By designating appropriate objects of fear, hate, praise, and desire, Proverbs aims to train its audiences' emotions and thereby shape their interactions with the world.

Using language similar to Proverbs', the book of Job famously asserts that "the fear of the Lord is wisdom and avoiding evil is understanding" (28:28; cf. Ps 111:10). These very qualities are attributed to Job three times at the book's beginning: he is described by the narrator and God as "blameless and upright, and fearing God and avoiding evil" (1:1.8; 2:3).

But God's counselor, the Satan, poses a provocative question: "does [Job] fear God for nothing?" (1:9). The Satan's reasoning is that God has provided Job with inducements – in this case, rewards for loyalty – without which Job would cease to fear God. The logic seems at first blush to depart from such inducements as fear of death. However, God's power to protect and to show mercy stems from the same source and reflects the same prerogatives. The Satan emphasizes precisely this protection as the root of the blessings Job has experienced (1:10).

Job, by contrast, dwells at length on his fear. He has been plunged from protection into nightmare: "I dread a dread (*paḥad pāḥadī*) and it comes upon me; and the thing I fear (*yāgōrī*) comes to me" (3:25). The terror (*ḥātat*) he experiences causes fear in others (6:21) because the "terrors of God" are now arrayed against him (6:4). The rod and "terror" (*'ēmā*) of God terrify (*teba 'ātannī*) Job (9:34; cf. 21:9 where the rod of God occurs in parallel with *paḥad*), making Job "fear [God]" as he speaks (9:35).

The association between rod (of discipline) and fear/terror is later matched by Bildad's pairing of fear/terror and divine rule: "rule and terror are with [God]" (25:2). The remainder of Bildad's speech draws attention to God's uncountable armies and the lowly status of mortals.

Elsewhere, the friends largely echo the Satan's reasoning. Eliphaz argues that Job's fear of God is Job's confidence (4:6). God "wounds but binds up," "strikes and heals" (5:18). With God's protection, one need not fear destruction (v. 20) or wild animals (v. 21). Zophar claims that turning from evil would remove Job's fear (11:14–15). Elihu, meanwhile, declares God's fearsome majesty (37:22) and power, justice, and righteousness that elicit mortal fear (vv. 23–24).

The combination of narrative frame and poetic dialogue yields a book that is far from systematic. What is certain is that fear of God in this book is not divorced from emotional and physical experience or from concerns of life and death. Job testifies to his personal experience of divine terror. The book underscores the inadequacy of all simplistic formulations.

6. Psalms⁴³

⁴³ In addition to their use of active verbal and participial forms, the psalms also use passive participial and verbal forms to declare that God and God's deeds are "fearsome" (*nōrā*). In 47:3, the psalmist declares to all nations that "the
[56]

Within the Hebrew scriptures, fear's social dimensions are perhaps nowhere as strongly emphasized as in the psalter. Participial or adjectival forms of "fear" appear frequently in the psalms as a designation of group belonging, while verbal forms denote a fear response that may also be enjoined on outsiders.⁴⁴ As a group designation, the claim to shared identity as fearers of the LORD promotes behaviors that strengthen bonds within the group and discourages behaviors that weaken them. Promise and observation of belonging, reward, protection, and salvation for fearers of the LORD can have a proselytic force or strengthen existing attitudes and behaviors.

Ps 15 inquires who may sojourn in God's tent.⁴⁵ The answer is one who "walks with integrity, does righteousness, speaks truth with their heart" (15:2), avoids slander and does not harm their neighbor (v. 3), who despises a rejected one and "honors fearers of the LORD" (v. 4). Overall, the psalm promotes attitudes and behaviors that lead to group cohesion and trust and discourages behaviors, such as slander, oath breaking, lending at interest, and harm to a neighbor that would corrode relationships within the group. Fearing God is contrasted with a status of social rejection, and thus appears to be a designation for group members in good standing. In a similar vein, Ps 22 locates "fearers of the LORD" within the assembly and congregation and places the phrase in parallel with the "offspring of Jacob/Israel" (22:23–24, 26; cf. Ps 115:9–12, 118:2–4, 135:19–20).⁴⁶

Ps 119 similarly links God-fearing with social approval and belonging, while also highlighting an embodied fear response. "I am a companion to every fearer-of-you, to every keeper of your precepts" (119:63); "those who fear you will see me and rejoice" (v. 74). In the face of adversity the psalmist prays, "let them turn to me, those who fear you" (v. 79). These expressions of companionship, welcome, and alliance present God-fearing as a visible marker of group identity. The same psalmist provides insight into her experience of fear of God: "my flesh shudders with dread (*paḥad*) of you; I fear your judgments" (v. 120 NAB; cf. NJPS "my flesh creeps from fear of you..."), demonstrating that in this didactic psalm, while fearing God clearly functions as a group

LORD is to be feared, great king over all the earth." Fear is here linked to God's royal role, which is transferred to God's people, for the king "led peoples under us, nations under our feet" (v. 4). In Ps 66, God's deeds are fearsome (vv. 3, 5), leading enemies to "cringe" (v. 3) and all earth to worship and praise (v. 4). In Ps 76:7, God is fearsome, because no one can stand before God's rage. When God made God's judgment heard from the heavens, "earth feared and was still" (v. 8; NJPS "the earth was numbed with fright"; NAB "the earth was terrified and reduced to silence"). Tribute should be brought to "the terror" (*môra'* v. 12), who is "feared" (*nôra'*) by the earth's kings (v. 13). God is also feared (*na'ārās*) in the council of holy ones and feared (*nôra'*) by all around [the LORD] (89:8). God's fearsome name is associated with God's royal power (99:3) and redemption (111:9). Ps 96 declares: "Great is the LORD and highly to be praised, and to be feared [*nôra'*] above all gods" (Ps 96:4; 1Chron 16:25).

⁴⁴ A longer treatment would also consider nouns and other lexemes within the semantic field of fear. For relevant uses of *yir'á* see Pss 2:11, 5:8, and 90:11. For the possibly related form *môra'* see Ps 9:21: "put terror [*môra'*] to them, LORD, let nations know: they are human." Examples of the root *b-h-l* include the following: Ps 2:5, "he will terrify them in his fury"; 83:16 "terrify them with your hurricane" (cf. v. 18); 90:7: "because we are done-in by your anger, and by your rage we are terrified [*nibhálnū*]" because God is mindful of human sin and human life "ebbs away" under God's fury (v. 9).

⁴⁵ Psalm numberings vary among ancient versions and among modern translations. I follow the numbering in MT.

⁴⁶ The psalm emphasizes God's power to save (vv. 21–22) and divine rule or kingship (v. 29), and encourages those who fear the LORD to give praise (v. 24).

identity marker, its meaning has not drifted away from its affective connotations. Vivid description of bodily sensation presents a sobering portrait of the experience of fear before the judgment of God.

In Ps 31, fearers of the LORD will receive great good that has been stored up for them. The substantive participial phrase “fearers-of-you” is parallel to those who take refuge in the LORD (cf. 115:11) and receive good “in the sight of the children of Adam / humankind” (31:20): while refuge may otherwise suggest hiding from view (see v. 21), naming all human beings as witnesses of their reward emphasizes public affiliation and may have an “evangelical” force.

A similar witnessing by “many” occurs in Ps 40: God intervened for the psalmist’s welfare and “put a song” in her mouth. As a result, “many will see and fear and trust in the LORD” (40:4). The same phrase, “see and fear” occurs at Ps 52:8: the righteous will see God’s striking down of the treacherous boaster; they will fear and laugh. This complex, twofold reaction is superficially paradoxical but reflects the twinning of reward and punishment and the logic that fear should motivate one to avoid the latter. They fear the power of God to punish. They laugh at the one who failed to fear God’s power and sought security elsewhere. Here “see and fear” is not evangelistic in the sense of recruiting new believers. It marks a moment within an iterative process whereby observation of reward and punishment reinforces and shapes existing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors among the righteous.⁴⁷

Another psalmist imagines a wider audience: when God strikes down the wicked “all humankind will fear and tell” what they have seen and what God has done (64:10). For the righteous, this will be an occasion for joy (v. 11).

The mingling of fear and joy is also found in Pss 65 and 67. God’s fearsome deeds are hope for the ends of the earth (65:6);⁴⁸ dwellers at the ends of the earth fear God’s signs, and lands far to the east and west shout for joy (v. 9). Ps 67 envisions universal recognition of God’s way, power (67:2), and equity (v. 4), leading to joy, praise (vv. 4–5), and fear (v. 7). Another psalmist declares that “nations will fear the Name of the LORD, all the kings of the earth [will fear] your glory” (102:16).

Elsewhere, a response of fear (*yirʾā*) combined with dread (MT *yagʾūrā*) or shaking (LXX) is enjoined upon all the earth and its inhabitants (33:8). This fear response is motivated by God’s powerful acts of creation (including creating the armies of heaven), the efficacy of divine command and enduring plan, divine knowledge, and God’s ability to “frustrate” plans of nations. The psalm contrasts God’s universal sovereignty with the relative powerlessness of earthly kings and nations, and highlights God’s choosing of God’s people: “the eye of the LORD is on the fearers of [the

⁴⁷ In a similar vein, in Ps 111, fear of the LORD is something one does or practices to achieve insight (v. 10).

⁴⁸ Cf. Ps 106:22, which recalls God’s fearsome deeds at the Reed Sea.

LORD], who await [the LORD’s] faithfulness” (33:18).⁴⁹ Here, by contrast to the universal use of the hortatory verb, the substantive participial or adjectival phrase “fearer of the LORD” designates the group of people the LORD has chosen as an inheritance (v. 12; cf. Ps 147:11,19–20). The psalmist highlights the protection and aid God provides for the fearers (vv. 19–20) and associates fearing with companion attitudes of trust and expectation (vv. 18, 21–22).⁵⁰

Protection becomes a visible marker of group identity in Ps 60. God has set up a banner in a place of safety, where fearers of the LORD can rally together during danger (v. 6). Such a banner allows group members to gather together when they are away from the sanctuary or their local community and functions as a socially-structuring signal to insiders and outsiders alike.

In a similar vein, the didactic Ps 34 asserts that an angel provides “fearers of the LORD” with supernatural protection (34:8). Fearers receive not only protection but what is needed for life: “Fear the LORD, [the LORD’s] holy ones, because [the LORD’s] fearers do not lack” (v. 10).⁵¹ The psalmist promises to teach children “fear of the LORD” (34:12), entices with a suggested promise of long life, and offers ethical guidance regarding integrity of speech, forsaking evil, doing good, and seeking shalom (vv. 12–14). She further underscores God’s propensity to rescue and save the righteous and the destruction that awaits the wicked. In this psalm, we see the use of “fearer of the LORD” as an emic in-group designation that overlaps significantly with holy ones, the righteous, the LORD’s servants, and those who take refuge in the LORD, and contrasts with the wicked, doers of evil, and haters of the righteous. The psalmist’s exhortation to fear the LORD is at least partly catechetical, and is framed as a response to learning the punishments and rewards God doles out for human behavior. That fear response, in turn, is intended to elicit “righteous” behavior.

In a similar vein, Ps 85 declares “truly, near to fearers [of the LORD] is [the LORD’s] salvation. The goal is to ensure that the LORD’s glory – a visible manifestation of God’s sovereign power — will dwell in the land (v. 10). Fearers are parallel to faithful ones, “[the LORD’s] people” (v. 9), and

⁴⁹ Cf. the rewards described in Ps 103: toward fearers of the LORD, God’s faithfulness is as great as the height of the heavens (v. 11) and compassion is like that of a parent (v. 13). God’s faithfulness is eternal (v. 17). Here ‘fearing’ is parallel to keeping commandments (v. 18).

⁵⁰ On the close connection between fear and trust in the psalter, see *Christine Brown Jones*, *When I am Afraid*. Fear in the Book of the Psalms, in: *Review and Expositor* 115.1 (2018), 15–25.

⁵¹ Other psalmists assert that “fearers of your Name” receive an inheritance (61:6), and the LORD gives food to fearers of [the LORD] 111:4; the LORD fulfills the desire of [the LORD’s] fearers, hears their cry, and rescues them (145:19). By contrast, the LORD destroys the wicked (v. 20). Ps 25 emphasizes God’s instruction (vv. 4–5, 8–9). “Whoever is a fearer of the LORD, [the LORD] will teach the path they should choose” (v. 12). Similarly, “The LORD’s counsel/council belongs to fearers of [the LORD], and [the LORD] reveals [the LORD’s] covenant to them” (v. 14). Members of the set “fearer of YHWH” will thus receive knowledge from God that will enable them to remain in relationship with God. In Ps 112 fearing the LORD (v. 1) obviates fear of ill-report and enemies (vv. 7–8). The “fearer of the LORD” is “blessed” or “fortunate” (cf. Ps 115:13; 128:1, 4) and delights in God’s commands (v. 1; cf. 128:1 “fearer of the LORD” is parallel to “walker in the LORD’s ways”). The psalm emphasizes the blessings of wealth, prosperity, longevity, and progeny, pairing these with a life-long commitment to justice and care for the poor.

ones who turn to God in their hearts. That is, the phrase aims both to evoke group identity *and* to encourage a disposition toward God.⁵²

7. Conclusions

Analysis of “fear of the LORD” and related forms in Hebrew biblical texts does not reveal fear to be *synonymous* with wisdom, nor with obedience, worship, or piety. Rather, Hebrew biblical texts that thematize fear of the LORD/God highlight a robust relationship between affect (disposition/emotion/feeling), cognition (learning/teaching/knowing/evaluating/choosing), and action (walking, doing, keeping commandments, worshiping, praising). Moreover, these texts consistently affirm the relational and social dimensions of fear of the LORD/God, emphasizing how these are simultaneously socially shaped and shaping of social realities.

Understanding emotion and affect

The interrelation between emotion, cognition, and action is well established in contemporary studies of affect. Klaus Scherer defines emotions as “clearly delineated, intensive patterns of affective processes” that have four distinctive features:

- 1) they are elicited by the combination of event and appraisal, in which a person judges an event to be relevant to their “needs, goals, values, and general well-being”;
- 2) they “have a strong motivational force, producing states of *action readiness*” [italics original] and preparing a person “to deal with important events in their lives”;
- 3) “Emotions engage the entire person,” including “somatovisceral and motor systems”;
- 4) they exert considerable power in relation to behavior and experience.⁵³

In this understanding, emotion includes not only subjective *feeling*, on which popular (and constructivist) understandings tend to focus, but also “elicitation processes, physiological symptoms, motor expression, and motivational changes.”⁵⁴ As such, emotion, like the broader

⁵² In Ps 86:11 the psalmist prays God to “unite my heart in order to fear your name.” This prayer recognizes the other fears or objects of fear that compete with fear of the LORD.

⁵³ Klaus R. Scherer, Emotions are emergent processes: they require a dynamic computational architecture, in: Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences 364, no. 1535 (December 12 2009), 3459–3474, citing Nico H. Frijda and Klaus R. Scherer, Emotion Definitions (Psychological Perspectives), in: D. Sander and K. R. Scherer (eds.), Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences, Oxford/New York, 2009, 142–144. Compare Scherer’s definition of emotion elsewhere as “an episode of massive synchronous recruitment of mental and somatic resources to adapt to and cope with a stimulus event that is subjectively appraised as highly pertinent to needs, goals, and values of the individual.” Klaus R. Scherer, Unconscious Processes in Emotion: The Bulk of the Iceberg, in: Lisa Feldman Barrett/Paula M. Niedenthal/Piotr Winkielman (eds.), Emotion and Consciousness, New York, 2009, 312–334, 314. See further Klaus R. Scherer, What are emotions? And how can they be measured? In: Social Science Information 44, no. 4 (2005), 695–729.

⁵⁴ Scherer, Emotions are emergent processes (note 53), 3461–3462. See also Klaus R. Scherer, On the Nature and Function

category of affect, is not divorced from reason and discernment, nor from body and action. It is deeply linked to each of these.

While Scherer's understanding places a great deal of emphasis on the individual person, Donald Wehrs characterizes affect in terms that open into a more socially located understanding, as "sensations, intensities, valences, attunements, dissonances, and interior movements shaped by pressures, energies, and affiliations embedded within or made part of diverse forms of embodied human life."⁵⁵ Wehrs' definition, though a bit fuzzy around the edges, subtly emphasizes the social embeddedness of the person and the multiform ways in which embodied social experiences impinge upon and shape affect and its interpretation. Margaret Wetherell takes a further step, explicitly emphasizing the interplay between individual and social domains and in particular drawing attention to the "relation between affect and discourse," encompassing in the latter category not only utterance but embodied communication, diverse media, and social contexts, all of which she broadly characterizes as "language in action."⁵⁶ Sara Ahmed's study of emotion as "cultural politics" further emphasizes ways in which emotions not only take shape and must be understood within a social world but also contribute to "world making."⁵⁷

Implications for Preaching

In a general sense, we do well to recognize the powerful insight of the biblical writers that fear does indeed shape our judgments and motivate our behaviors. The scripture writers understood all too well that the LORD was not the only possible object of our fear. Learning and practicing the fear of God was considered a path to life in part because it countered fear of other powers. In the midst of current events we do well to remember that in Exodus 1, the midwives chose civil disobedience to preserve the lives of children because their fear of God outweighed the command of Pharaoh (vv. 17 and 21). And the frequent biblical injunction "do not fear" placed uncertainty, lack, lies, and attacks within the wider frame of God's providence, promise, and protection.

If, as I have argued, fear of God in the Hebrew Bible is predicated on God's power not only to create and protect life but also to destroy it, some, though surely not all, of us will find ourselves confronting certain theological claims we do not ascribe to. To put it bluntly, do you think God sends (or sent) lions to eat people who do/did not fear the LORD? If you do, I may have other questions for you. If you don't, how much of this edifice falls away? How exactly *do* we understand

of Emotion: a Component Process Approach, in: Klaus R. Scherer/Paul Ekman (eds.), *Approaches to Emotion*, Hillsdale (NJ) 1984, 293–317, 294, where he documents this understanding as an emerging consensus view.

⁵⁵ Donald R. Wehrs, Introduction: Affect and Texts. *Contemporary Inquiry in Historical Context*, in: idem/Thomas Blake (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*, Cham, Switzerland, 2017, 1–93, 2.

⁵⁶ Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, London, 2012, 51.

⁵⁷ *Ahmed* (note 29), 12.

God's power over life and death? The answer to that question, however difficult, uncertain, or complex, will necessarily shape how we approach "fear of the LORD" in our preaching.

We saw in Deuteronomy and Proverbs that discourse of fear aimed to inculcate specific emotion-responses, decision making, and behavior. Psalms used "fearers of God" as an in-group label, constructing a discourse of belonging and reward to reinforce affect, disposition, group identity and cohesion, and conformity of social and religious practice. Yet conformity within one group often means opposition to another. Discourses of fear, including fear of God, continue to divide people from one another.

The insights of Wehrs, Wetherell, and Ahmed highlight the critical, contemporary role of scripture, parent, teacher, politician, news media, social network, troll farm, faith community, and preacher in constructing affective discourses that guide judgments and motivate behavior. How do we do this responsibly? In some ways I think that for all its violence, 2Kings 17 offers us much needed guidance, helping us to shed our willful romanticism so that we can view biblical discourses of fear with a more sober eye. We see that catechesis can fail, theological discourse can be coopted for manipulative ends, and the results are often difficult to predict. But fear is not something we wish away. We can try to hide from the God who knows our sin, and from the objects of our fear on earth. Or, we can answer fear with courage, naming and calling upon the God of justice and mercy as we challenge and respond to the fears that haunt and shape our world today.

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