

BEING WISE BETWIXT ORDER AND MYSTERY: KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS AND FEARING THE LORD

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Abstract

Any attempt to come to grips with ‘the fear of the Lord’ as a key concept for the interpretation of Old Testament wisdom, must appreciate that it is rooted in texts that presuppose an encounter with God that can cause a variety of responses: a feeling of horror or terror; as well as reverent awe that forms the basis of the pious veneration of the Lord in the form of obedience and praise. Although statistical analysis reveals a concentration of occurrences in Deuteronomy (and the so-called Deuteronomistic History), the Psalms and Wisdom literature, it does not presuppose a clear linear development. The theological interpretation of Old Testament wisdom literature must be aware of the ongoing creative tension between order (keeping the commandments) and mystery (fearing the Lord) – as summarized in the conclusion of the Book of Ecclesiastes (12:13).

Key Words: Divine Mystery, Fear of God, Old Testament Wisdom, Ecclesiastes 12:13

Introduction

Some 36 years ago James Crenshaw (1976:2) made the observation that ‘Wisdom’s shade tree has suddenly become a haven for many, and the excitement of new discovery fills the air.’ During the previous century the ‘great saving acts of God’ were the focus of the theological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, and Israelite and early Jewish wisdom were frowned upon as being part of so-called ‘general revelation’ that had at most a tenuous relationship with Christian Theology (Blocher 1977:3).

On the one hand, we have scholars such as Horst D Preuss (1974:165-181) who are still of the opinion that Old Testament wisdom remained ‘pagan at heart’, is essentially ‘alien to the true faith in the LORD’, due to a superficial ‘Jahwesierung’ – Old Testament wisdom is like a Gothic porch added to a Romanesque church, an addition that cannot mask its true identity! On the other hand, scholars such as Gemser (1937:13) and Scott (1965:36) considered the expression ‘The fear of the Lord is the principle of wisdom’ to be the ‘motto’ or the ‘keyword’ of Wisdom literature. Von Rad (1972:67-68) was convinced that the ‘fear of the Lord’ embodied Israelite religious epistemology and was its ‘most special possession’. These sentiments were echoed across the Atlantic in more evangelical circles

when Walter C Kaiser (1978:170) argued that: ‘the fear of the Lord was the dominating concept and organizing theological principle in wisdom literature.’¹

Brief Research Survey

During the 1960s at least three monographs focused on the theme of ‘the fear of the Lord, or of God’ that went beyond Rudolph Otto’s (1925) very influential summary of all major religions, *‘mysterium tremendum et fascinans’* by not presupposing a very limited semantic field for ‘fear’:

Siegfried Plath (1963:9) starts his study with a survey of the different grammatical forms of the verb *jr’* in the Old Testament and comments that it is clear that this particular verb has many shades of meaning ranging from the fear of death due to the wrath of God (1 Sam 12:18) to the pious reaction of someone who experiences the loving presence of God (Ps 130:4). A stark difference is presumed between the quaking fear of the unbeliever and the trusting and loving inclination of the ‘fearer of God’ (*‘Gottesfürchtige’*).²

The study by Joachim Becker (1965) is more linguistic in approach because he analyzed the terminology used to depict the ‘fear of God’ under headings that refer to the adjectives, verbs and nouns found in the semantic fields concerned. Unfortunately Becker does not reflect on how the references to the ‘fear of God or the Lord’ relate to the message of the book as a whole (Wilson 1995:65).

Louis Derousseaux (1970:21-66) was critical of the studies of Plath and Becker because they did not take the Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern contexts all that seriously. To rectify this problem Derousseaux conducted a detailed study of the ‘fear of God’ in Egyptian, Akkadian, Aramaic and Ugaritic texts. One of his surprising conclusions was that the fear of the king was much stronger than the ‘fear of God’.

During the 1970s and 1980s several scholars argued for a correspondence between ‘the fear of God’ and human conscience. In his discussion of Deuteronomy 25:18 in which Amalek is criticized for attacking the faint and the weary during the exodus, Weinfeld (1972:275) is of the opinion that the *‘jirat elohim’* is ‘conscience, the human quality deters a man (*sic*) from harming somebody even though there is no fear of punishment.’ Some ten years later Cox (1982:89) advances a similar point of view in his study of the ‘fear of the Lord’ in Proverbs 1-9: ‘So ‘fear’ is a form, a conscience that calls for an intellectual adhesion to a principle, the divine order, the concept of the goodness of life...’ No general consensus developed in this regard and Sarna (1989:143) made the valid observation about the ‘fear of God’ as ‘not synonymous with conscience, for by definition, the desired norms of conduct are conceived as being God-given rather than deriving from any presumed, intuitive discrimination of right and wrong.’

From time to time scholars revisited Rudolph Otto’s *‘mysterium tremendum et fascinans’* to describe the ‘fear of the Lord’. Michael Barre (1981:42) characterized this type of fear as a response to the numinous – as ‘an overpowering awe in the presence of the wholly other.’

Recently Kirsten Nielsen (2009:74) took as point of departure that the ‘fear of God occurs in various reactions to the encounter with God’ and that the ‘God of Israel is not

¹ Krüger (2000:14) provides a balanced perspective on the importance of the ‘fear of God’: ‘Die adequate Haltung des Menschen gegenüber Gott ist die ‘Gottesfurcht’... Sie ist nicht einfach identisch mit der üblichen religiösen Praxis, sondern leitet dazu an ... religiös wertvoller als Opfer und Gebete, Gelübde und Träume.’

² Plath (1962:10) therefore maintains a sharp distinction between *Menschenfürcht* and *Gottesfürcht*.

only ‘a *numen fascinatum et tremendum*, but also a personal God’; therefore the fear of God ‘includes both psychological and ethical aspects...’

Job Jindo (2011:438) presupposes ‘an innate connection between fear and knowledge, which does not require a religious context’ – a connection in which a certain knowledge precedes and leads to the ‘fear of God’.³ Therefore the ‘fear of God’ makes life ‘not merely *meaningful* but *authentic*’ and the importance of the concept ‘fear of God’ is ‘not only *epistemological* but also *ontological*.’⁴

Fear of God in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament⁵

Keeping the Commandments or Maintaining Order

It is significant that the most important instruction of Deuteronomy, the total and unqualified love and obedience towards God (6:4-5), is framed by the demand to fear the Lord (6:2 & 13). Becker (1965:283) is of the opinion that the covenant provides the conceptual framework in Deuteronomy within which the fear of the Lord can be related to the obedience of the law or instruction (8:6;13:4).

According to Deuteronomy the fear of the Lord is a predisposition that must be learned in different ways (Van Pelt & Kaiser 1997:530): by being in the presence of the Lord in the place (temple) that He will choose as a dwelling for his name (14:23); even the king must read and observe the whole of the law and statutes to learn to fear the Lord (17:19). In the final speech of Moses to Israel he commands all men, women, children and resident aliens to hear the law of God and learn to fear the Lord their God (31:12-13).

Both Deuteronomy (10:12-13) and the so-called Deuteronomistic History (Joshua 24:14) ‘depict YHWH as a ruler who commands the loyalty and obedience of his people’ (Nielsen 2009:74).

The fear of the Lord in some Psalms ‘implies trust and faithfulness to YHWH’ (Pss 22:24, 26; 31:20; 66:16; 145:19; 147:11). There are also specific Psalms (112:1; 119:63) where the fear of the Lord is almost synonymous with Torah piety for those who delight in the commandments of the Lord (Nielsen 2009:74-75).

Fearing the Lord or Experiencing Divine Mystery

In the Psalms the fear of God enables members of the cultic community, sometimes referred to as ‘the fearers of Yahweh’, to worship (praise, glorify, venerate) God in the Jerusalem temple (22:23, 25; 66:16). There seems to be a tendency in later psalms for the fear of God to designate the pious (holy) part of the community that is faithful to the Lord’s decrees (34:9; 119:79). Israel or the people of God are referred to as ‘those of fear the Lord’ and are related to ‘the righteous’ who are allowed access to the temple (15:4).

³ One must be aware of the distinction between two types of knowledge made by Jindo (2011:438): propositional or descriptive knowledge and perspectival knowledge that determines the way according to which cognition functions.

⁴ Jindo (2011:453) is still in the process of exploring what he refers to as the ‘historic and cosmic significance of the fear of the God.’ Up to this point he has made a case that ‘the state of the human mind’ influences how one conceives the course of world history, as well as the ‘distortion and restoration of cosmic order...’

⁵ Fear in the Old Testament usually entails a response to an external threat and varies in terms of degree and object from the more mundane to the more religious (Gruber 1990:420). The extent of the fear is influenced by the proximity and magnitude of the threat (Washington 2007:438).

Different types of blessings are bestowed on those who fear the Lord because they experience his steadfast love and compassion (103:11,13,17) and in one of the so-called wisdom psalms such as 111:10 we find the expression that ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Longman 2008:204-205).

Defining Wisdom betwixt Order and Mystery in Wisdom Literature

Walther Eichrodt (1985:80-92) presupposed that for “a long time the wisdom of God made virtually no contribution to Israel’s religious understanding.” He discerned the following aspects of wisdom from pre-exilic to post-exilic times:

- *Wisdom as savoir faire* – older Israelite wisdom is viewed as being strongly secular and only loosely connected with religious conviction. This gnomic wisdom ‘was concerned first and foremost with skill in practical affairs, as well as with all kinds of riddles and fables dealing with the worlds of animals and plants, and not with abstract investigation into wisdom...’ (1 Kgs 5:9-12).
- *Wisdom as the principle of cosmic order and as hypostasis*: gradually the Israelite concept of wisdom was ‘radically expanded’ because wisdom now became much more than practical skillfulness but also incorporated reflection on ‘the purpose and order discernible in the cosmos ...’ (Job 28:23, 25-27). Thus *hokma* is now presented as a ‘cosmic principle’ that came into existence before creation even started (Prov 8:22-31). Up to this point in time wisdom entailed instruction about correct living (Babylonian, Persian and Egyptian influences), but from the third century BCE onwards Hellenism’s influence became more apparent. Wisdom not only became personified but also hypostasized with the juxtaposition of wisdom and folly, even evil.
- *Wisdom as a principle of revelation*: Wisdom as the beginning of creation becomes impenetrable to humankind and only becomes accessible by means of the fear of God (Prov 1:7; 9:10). On the one hand, wisdom and the fear of God become almost synonymous (Book of Proverbs); while on the other hand, ‘a deposit of truth’ is mediated by Wisdom – even amongst non-Israelites (Book of Ben Sirach).
- *Wisdom and the problem of truth*: The hypostasis of Wisdom within the Hellenistic period was very significant when it became associated with the Law (*Torah*). Eventually a distinction was made between the *revelatio generalis* and the *revelatio specialis* – the latter earmarked for Israel and it also provided the criteria in terms of which the ‘general revelation’ was evaluated. Thus the ‘fear of the Lord’ manifested itself not only as the beginning and root of Wisdom, but also as ‘the fulfilment and crown of Wisdom’.

The “fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom” is also of fundamental importance for the **Book of Proverbs** (1:7; 9:10).⁶ The reason for this might be found in the suggestion that the concept constitutes the first step in “the quest for a meaningful existence” (Barre 1981:41). Not only is the book of Proverbs framed by the ‘fear of the Lord’ (1:7 & 31:30), but it also relates the concept with tangible rewards such as a long life (10:27), as well as riches and honour (22:4). Less material associations related to the ‘fear of the Lord’ in Proverbs is knowledge of God (2:5), caution that turns away from evil (14:16) and humility (22:4). In a study of the polarity of the fear of God and wisdom in the Eden Narrative (Gen 2-3) and in the book of Proverbs, Forti (2011:45-57) suggests that the conflict between

⁶ Proverbs seems to prefer the expression ‘fear the Lord’ to ‘fear God’ which is often found in Ecclesiastes.

divine and human wisdom in the beginning of Genesis remains unresolved, while the book of Proverbs “presents a refined polarity between the sage’s teaching and the fear of God.”

Job is described as the ideal or ultimate example of someone who fears God – blameless, upright, turning away from evil and interceding with sacrifice on behalf of his children (1:1-6). In a poem inquiring where wisdom is to be found that is significantly positioned in the centre of the book of Job, the ‘fear of the Lord’ is again closely associated with wisdom and becomes synonymous with understanding as the departure from evil (Job 28:28). According to Collins (2004:516) to fear the Lord ‘is to accept human limitation, and to recognize that we are not the center of the universe...’ and thus ‘Job affirms a central teaching of traditional wisdom, even if he questions the usual assumptions of order and consequence on which that tradition was based.’

The enigmatic **Ecclesiastes** associates the ‘fear of God’ with appropriate behaviour and wise discernment amidst his experience of human existence as being vain (7:15-18). As Job and his four friends explore different modes of wisdom, so Ecclesiastes investigates the possibility of a fulfilling life that is not in vain and comes to the conclusion that: ‘The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the duty of everyone’ (12:13). It is remarkable that Ecclesiastes was included in the canon of Scripture, not only ‘due to its supposed Solomonic authorship’ but also as a testimony ‘to the critical spirit that pervades much of the Hebrew Scriptures.’ (Collins 2004:526).

In **Sirach** (1:11-20; 25:10-11) the fear of the Lord and wisdom become almost identical and it represents ‘a more developed form of the Torah piety, joined with wisdom and the fear of the Lord... (2:15-17; 21:11)’ (Washington 2007:441).

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Is it really clear-cut that Ecclesiastes 12:13 is the product of ‘a secondary voice of a later redactor’ that is often described as ‘a conservative sage’ who offered his final counsel to ‘fear God and keep his commandments’? (Perdue 2008:206).

The second to last verse of Ecclesiastes consist of a brief declaration: ‘the end of the matter...’, combined with a motive clause: ‘for this is the whole duty of humanity.’⁷ One can consider different functions for the exhortations ‘fear God’ and ‘keep his commandments’. Longman (1998:282) contends that to ‘fear God’ intends the listener or reader to have ‘a right relationship with God, one in which he is properly subservient to the deity... to respect, honour and worship the Lord.’ At the same time this phrase invokes other parts of the wisdom literature (Proverbs 1:7; Job 28:28 etc).

The second exhortation ‘keep his commandments’ is not found elsewhere in the book of Ecclesiastes and seems to strengthen the impression that forms part of a later addition. With this supplementation Ecclesiastes is brought back into the fold of more orthodox worship as communicated by the older legal sections of the Old Testament canon. Thus the addressee of the exhortations is obliged not only to establish a right relationship with God (‘fear God’), but also to maintain this relationship in the legally prescribed manner (‘keep his commandments’).

In the last verse (v 14) we find a second motive clause: ‘For God will bring every deed into judgment...’ that is similar to 11:9, although the difference is the close connection with the law in this context (Longman 1998:283).

⁷ Ecclesiastes 12:13 is repeated by the Masoretes in unpointed form after the last verse (v 14) because they did not want the book to end with the word *evil* (Longman 1998:281).

More recently Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 are perceived to be “late additions to the book aimed at correcting its overall sceptical perspective” and that they are similar to law-observant eschatological wisdom texts of the Hellenistic period in Qumran such as 4QMysteries and 4QInstruction, as well as the depiction of the final judgment of the wicked in Psalms 146-150 (Carr 2011:189-191; Lange 1998:113-119).

Conclusion

Is religious faith ‘merely the affirmation of certain beliefs and principles which are inferred from Scripture and Tradition in an Aristotelian way’? (Torrance 1986:461ff; Hood 2004:145). What role are emotions and experience playing in the ongoing process of evolving religious knowledge and in establishing religious faith?⁸

Any attempt to come to grips with ‘the fear of the Lord’ must appreciate that it is rooted in an encounter with God that can cause a variety of responses: a feeling of horror or terror; as well as reverent awe that forms the basis of the pious veneration of the Lord in the form of obedience and praise (Nielsen 2009:74). Although statistical analysis reveals a concentration of occurrences in Deuteronomy (and the Deuteronomistic History), the Psalms and Wisdom literature, it does not presuppose a clear linear development (Stähli 1997:569; contra Derousseaux 1970).

The references to the ‘fear of God’ in the Torah, Psalms and Wisdom literature constitute challenging reminders of the epistemological importance of the experience of wonder and of the Other in life’s ongoing journey towards meaningful discernment (O’Dowd 2009:182). Ecclesiastes 12:13 establishes a remarkable religious synthesis between an existing legal orthodoxy (‘keep the commandments’) and a redefined definition of the essence of wisdom (‘fear God’) – not the one or the other but a balance between the two that requires ongoing wise discernment.⁹

The study of wisdom literature in the Old Testament poses the challenge to mediate a hermeneutical balance between order (causality of deed and consequence) and mystery (the experience of divine presence in personal and cultic spheres). South African Old Testament scholars are well positioned in terms of diverging religious cultures to strike a creative balance between order and mystery and not to presuppose that they constitute irreconcilable alternatives!

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⁸ A remarkable relationship developed between the law and love when *torah* became the ‘direct proof of love’ – this can be traced in Deuteronomy (4:6ff & 30:11ff) where love became associated with obedience... echoed by Jesus in John 14:15 ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ (Eichrodt 1984:298).

⁹ This is contrary to the point of view of some wisdom scholars who argue that the epilogue in Ecclesiastes concludes that ‘One does not need wisdom; it is sufficient to keep the commandments’ (Collins 2004:526).

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