

# THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM IS PARANOIA: AN OVERLOOKED ASPECT OF THE 'FEAR OF YHWH' IN THE CONTEXT OF LACANIAN PSYCHO-EPISTEMOLOGY

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## Abstract

*Much has been written on the concept of 'the fear of Yhwh' in biblical wisdom literature. The scope thereof is said to include anything from sheer terror before the deity to pious respect for benevolence. In this article, a different necessary property of the basic disposition is identified. It is argued that if as many texts in the Hebrew Bible state a) wisdom involves the fear of Yhwh, and that b) possessing knowledge of some sort is a necessary condition for having wisdom, and that c) all knowledge is essentially paranoid as Lacanian psycho-epistemology suggests, then it follows that d) the quest for wisdom itself is partly driven by paranoia.*

**Key Words:** Wisdom, Fear of Yhwh, Lacan, Paranoia, Religious Epistemology

*Could it be that wisdom appears on earth as a raven, drawn  
by the faint smell of carrion?<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

With regard to Old Testament wisdom there are several questions that are fundamental without being presumptuous, including the following:

- Why did the biblical sages desire wisdom?
- Why was this wisdom associated with the acquisition of knowledge of how life works and knowing how to live as a result?
- Why was the beginning of wisdom said to be fear (understood as terror or respect)?
- Why was it considered evil and even dangerous to be unwise?
- Why was the moral order considered to be a persecutory dimension and personified wisdom as a woman who threatened those who failed to heed her demands?
- Why was the god of wisdom a scrutinizing judge primarily concerned with retribution?

The hypothesis of this study that links all of these questions is that at the heart of wisdom there lies, amongst others, a brooding paranoia. But even though positing a pathological condition at the roots of something as noble as the quest for wisdom may seem radical and deliberately provocative, the argument in favour of the conclusion involves the following

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1980), [1889], 67.

simple line of reasoning: if we can agree that a) knowledge was assumed to be a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for wisdom; and b) all knowledge is to some extent paranoid in a Lacanian sense, then it follows that paranoia (a term not meant pejoratively in this article) is a jointly necessary condition for the desire for wisdom to exist. If this can be granted then perhaps the will to wisdom like that for knowledge might have partly pathological (paranoiac) origins. It is not as stereotypes suggest the morally laudable desire of a calm and collected mature subject.

To justify these outlandish ideas I shall look at the relationship paranoid-knowledge and wisdom more closely. As illustration, I shall examine cases of possible paranoid elements in certain propositions in the three Old Testament wisdom books. In this regard, I should stress outright that my claim is not that wisdom can be wholly equated with paranoia, that all paranoiac traits are necessarily pathological, or that the wisdom enterprise as such is psychologically dysfunctional. I am simply asking whether one of the motivating factors in the desire to be wise might be a latent paranoia in the Lacanian epistemological sense (for more on which, see below). I make no absolute claims in this regard – I only want to play with a radical notion for the novel and clarifying perspective, as well as the potent demystifying explanatory value it might offer on some aspects of biblical wisdom. I have very little invested in the theory other than the hope it might be interesting.

### **What is Lacanian Paranoia?**

The word *paranoia* comes from the Greek 'παράνοια' (*paranoia*) popularly and etymologically explained as meaning to be beside oneself (i.e. mad). However, employed as an adjective in psychiatry, the term 'paranoid' has become attached to a diverse set of conditions, from paranoid schizophrenia, through paranoid depression, to paranoid personality – not to mention a motley collection of paranoid 'psychoses', 'reactions', and 'states'. As such, paranoia denotes a disorder which has been argued in and out of existence, and whose clinical features, course, boundaries, and virtually every other aspect of which are controversial.<sup>2</sup>

Of interest to this study is not a classical or prototypical definition of paranoia so much as what the psycho-analyst/philosopher Jacques Lacan had to say about its relation to knowledge. Lacan's linguistic reinterpretation of Freud profoundly changed the institutional face of the psychoanalytical movement internationally. His seminars in the 1950s were one of the formative environments of the currency of philosophical ideas that dominated French humanities in the 1960s and '70s, and became known in the Anglophone world as 'post-structuralism.'<sup>3</sup> However, reconstructing a Lacanian theory on paranoia is no mean feat. Lacan is not very accessible and his writings offer no focused or systematic treatment of paranoia. As a result he invites controversy<sup>4</sup> and is often misinterpreted.<sup>5</sup>

Lacan's comments on paranoiac knowledge are limited to a few fragments in his *Écrits* and his *Seminars*. Because his scant remarks on the subject have genuine theoretical value, however, it is my intention show how Lacan's insights might also have exegetical utility.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter. J McKenna, *Schizophrenia and related syndromes* (Hove, UK., Psychology Press 1997), 238.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Mills, Lacan on paranoiac knowledge, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Vol 20(1), 2003, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan's name has also become a dirty word among those who detest everything postmodern and reduce the latter to psychobabble. However, it is not relevant for our purposes whether Lacan was correct in all his views in order to appreciate what he has to offer to our topic at hand. Notwithstanding some valid critique against his work, Lacan is to my mind an important figure to engage with in any discussion about the psychological foundations of wisdom epistemology.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Mills, Lacan on Paranoiac Knowledge, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Vol 20/1 (2003), 30-51.

Lacan himself seemed not to differentiate much between different types and subtypes of paranoia when he linked it to knowledge. According to Mills,<sup>6</sup> this is evident when looking at the knowledge-paranoia relation in the context of Lacan's three registers or orders:

- Developmentally, knowledge is paranoid because it involves an illusory self-recognition of autonomy, control, and mastery, thus leading to persecutory anxiety and self-alienation.
- Secondly, through the *symbolic* structures of language and speech, desire is foisted upon the knowing subject as a foreboding demand threatening to invade and destroy uniquely subjective inner experiences.
- And finally, the process of knowing itself is paranoid because it horrifically confronts the *real*, namely, the unknown.

Our primary interest here lies with the first register where paranoid knowledge is most visible, i.e. the imaginary. Imaginary knowledge is based on a fantasy of self-mastery and unity and is constitutive of the ego.<sup>7</sup> It is paranoid because it has the same structure as paranoia (both involve the delusion of absolute knowledge and mastery), and because one of the preconditions of all human knowledge is the 'paranoiac alienation of the ego.'<sup>8</sup>

What Lacan calls 'the mirror stage' lays the foundation for paranoid knowledge.<sup>9</sup> To be human involves being paranoid insofar as members of the species are haunted by the sense of an 'other' who influences their thoughts and actions. The basic idea can be illustrated in comic fashion with a bit of psycho-analytic humour from the popularizer and disciple of Lacan, Slavoj Žižek:

A man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to the mental institution where the doctors do their best to finally convince him that he is not a grain but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back very trembling of scare – there is a chicken outside the door and that he is afraid that it would eat him. 'Dear fellow,' says his doctor, 'you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man'. 'Of course I know that,' replies the patient, 'but does the chicken know it?'<sup>10</sup>

This story is used by psychoanalysts to exemplify the key role of the Other's knowledge and the theory that all knowledge is imbued with paranoia. We need the image of ourselves "in order to establish relationships with other people and in order to negotiate the physical and social reality of our world."<sup>11</sup> This need arises from the fact that as infants we cannot fend for ourselves, and this sense of 'organic insufficiency' persists throughout our lives. In this respect, we are also 'haunted' by nature, by the physical vulnerability and mortality against which our self-concepts, relationships, and myriad strategies of personal care and defense must ultimately fail to protect us.<sup>12</sup> As a result, we want to know how to live and master the art of living (hence wisdom). The question now is to what extent wisdom can be linked to knowledge and whether there are indications of a connection between wisdom and paranoia in the episteme of OT wisdom itself.

<sup>6</sup> Mills, Lacan on paranoid knowledge, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 306.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 351.

<sup>11</sup> CriticalLink, *Lacan: The Mirror Stage: Guide to*, 3-4 P 13-16 [cited 2 December 2012], Online: <http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticallink/lacan/guide4.html>.

<sup>12</sup> CriticalLink, 3-4.

## **Knowledge and Fear as Necessary Condition for Wisdom in Proverbs**

This section has three related objectives: 1) showing how being wise and knowing are linked in philosophical perspectives on the phenomenon of wisdom; 2) showing how wisdom and knowledge are related in some texts in the Book of Proverbs and 3) showing that in the latter case the connection can be correlated with the concept of the fear of Yhwh. With regard to the first objective, many views in the historical and contemporary philosophical literature on wisdom have knowledge as a necessary condition for being wise.<sup>13</sup> All of these views, however, clearly distinguish knowledge from mere expertise on some subject. Moreover, all of these views maintain that wise people know 'what is important.'<sup>14</sup> The views differ, for the most part, over what it is that the wise person must know and whether there is any action that is required for wisdom. The bottom line here is that a wise person is thought to be someone who knows a lot about the Universe and our place in it. The main problem here, of course is that some of the most knowledgeable people are not wise.<sup>15</sup>

Already Aristotle was well aware of the limitations of equating wisdom with knowledge as such. As a result, he made a distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom.<sup>16</sup> Whereas theoretical wisdom approximates speculative philosophy, practical wisdom is closer to biblical wisdom in that it requires knowing, in general, how to live well. Of course, in the OT, wisdom is also associated with both of the aforementioned types of knowledge (although theoretical foci are rare and the details and contents of such knowledge are often only implicit). This is most evident in proverbs featuring synonymous and synthetic parallelisms, as the following decontextualized examples (amongst others) clearly show. None of these, however, overtly links knowledge to fear:

For Yhwh gives **wisdom**;  
from his mouth come **knowledge** and understanding (Prov 2:10)

For **wisdom** will come into your heart,  
and **knowledge** will be pleasant to your soul (Prov 2:16)

A scoffer seeks **wisdom** in vain,  
but **knowledge** is easy for a man of understanding (Prov 14:6)

**A wise man** is mightier than a strong man,  
and **a man of knowledge** than he who has strength (Prov 24:5)

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941, 935-1112); René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Works*, E Haldane and G Ross, trans. and eds. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 201-302, Richard Garrett, "Three Definitions of Wisdom", in Lehrer *et al.* 1996, 221-232, John Kekes, "Wisdom", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20/3 (1983), 277-286, Keith Lehrer, Jeannie Lum, Beverly A Slichta and Nicholas D Smith (eds.), *Knowledge, Teaching, and Wisdom* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), Keith Lehrer and Nicholas Smith, "Introduction", in Lehrer *et al.* 1996., 3-17, Norman Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), Philip J McKenna, *Schizophrenia and related syndromes* (Hove, UK., Psychology Press 1997), Robert Nozick, "What is Wisdom and Why do Philosophers Love it so?", in his *The Examined Life* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> See Sharon Ryan "Wisdom", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), n. p. [cited 28 November 2012] Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/wisdom/>>. The philosophical perspective on the relation between wisdom and knowledge here is largely indebted to Ryan's views as encountered in the aforementioned source.

<sup>15</sup> Ryan "Wisdom", n. p.

<sup>16</sup> Ryan "Wisdom", n. p.

I have not learned **wisdom**,  
nor have I **knowledge** of the Holy One (Prov 30:3)

In the Book of Proverbs, as in the history of psycho-analysis from Freud and Klein to Lacan, knowledge as such is a dialectical enterprise that actually stands in relation to fear, the latter being influential in paranoia.<sup>17</sup> The following texts (again, amongst others) are more forthcoming in the matter.

The **fear** of Yhwh is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction (Prov 1:7)

Because they hated knowledge  
and did not choose the **fear** of Yhwh (Prov 1:29)

The **fear** of Yhwh is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Prov 9:10)

It is irrelevant whether we see fear here as pious respect or sheer terror.<sup>18</sup> It does not seem to be wrong to say that a Lacanian type of epistemological paranoia is related to the sages' attempt to manufacture a future-perfect mastery. Both from a philosophical perspective and in the Book of Proverbs, what a wise person needs to know and understand may constitute a varied list:

[t]he most important goals and values of life – the ultimate goal, if there is one; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what kinds of dangers threaten the achieving of these goals; how to recognize and avoid or minimize these dangers; what different types of human beings are like in their actions and motives (as this presents dangers or opportunities); what is not possible or feasible to achieve (or avoid); how to tell what is appropriate when; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; how to improve oneself and one's relationships with others or society; knowing what the true and unapparent value of various things is; when to take a long-term view; knowing the variety and obduracy of facts, institutions, and human nature; understanding what one's real motives are; how to cope and deal with the major tragedies and dilemmas of life, and with the major good things too.<sup>19</sup>

The above list correlates well with what we find in the Book of Proverbs in expressions containing the concept of the fear of Yhwh and implying that god-fearing folk are also those who have mastered the art of living.

The **fear** of Yhwh prolongs life,  
but the years of the wicked will be short. (Prov 10:27)

In the **fear** of Yhwh one has strong confidence,  
and his children will have a refuge (Prov 14:26)

The **fear** of Yhwh is a fountain of life,  
that one may avoid the snares of death (Prov 14:27)

By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for,  
and by the **fear** of Yhwh a man avoids evil (Prov 16:6)

<sup>17</sup> Mills, Lacan on Paranoid Knowledge, 31.

<sup>18</sup> The literature dealing with this concept is vast. Much of it is motivated by the need to argue in favour of a certain interpretation of the concept of fear, mostly to downplay any possible negative connotations relative to the love of God in modern biblical theism. For our purposes, the difference between terror and respect is irrelevant in the context of being a source of wisdom. To my mind in most cases in the text it is a case of both/and rather than either/or with regard to the terror/respect dichotomy.

<sup>19</sup> Nozick as quoted in Ryan "Wisdom", n, p.

The **fear** of Yhwh leads to life;  
and he who has it rests satisfied;  
he will not be visited by harm (Prov 19:23)

The reward for humility and **fear** of Yhwh  
is riches and honor and life (Prov 22:4)

Let not your heart envy sinners,  
but continue in the **fear** of Yhwh all the day (Prov 23:17)

My son, **fear** Yhwh and the king,  
and do not disobey either of them (Prov 24:21)

Blessed is the man who **fears** Yhwh always;  
but he who hardens his heart will fall into calamity (Prov 28:14)

As in Lacan, knowledge as the fear of Yhwh is linked to paranoia in the sense of holding persecutory beliefs concerning the deity's judgments as a perceived threat. The processes of knowing are in themselves paranoid because they confront the real and, in it, the god's mind as partly unknown.<sup>20</sup> And if the fear of Yhwh leads to life and safety than by counterfactual logic it follows that if one does not fear Yhwh and therefore begin in the quest for wisdom one is likely to attract the opposite, namely death and danger (presumably also by Yhwh's judgments, whether as cause or passive onlooker).

For a man's ways are before the eyes of Yhwh,  
and he watches all his paths (Prov 5:21)

As in Lacan's theory of paranoid knowledge there is no ultimate relief for the wise for both the father/teacher persona speaking in wisdom and the exalted Father in the sky are *always* watching, judging as ego ideals in the symbolic order. This ideal ego is also wisdom which is the ideal of perceived perfection that one strives to emulate. Yet believing this cannot but induce paranoia mythologically euphemised as the fear of Yhwh who personifies the source of wisdom. Given the fact that the instructions of the wise consist largely of warnings, prohibitions, catastrophizing and Foucauldian othering, the knowing subject who has internalized such wisdom *qua* fear will show mild symptoms of paranoid personality disorder. (S)he will be suspicious of other people, limit social life to avoid evil, feel in danger of either the snares of fools or divine judgment, look for evidence to support suspicions, find hidden motives of exploitation everywhere, and aim to escape from the chaos of life through the projection of order. Clearly then proverbial wisdom involves paranoid knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

### **Job and the Other as Persecutory**

Also in Job wisdom is associated with the fear of Yhwh in the sense of paranoid knowledge of a persecutory Other vis-à-vis the subject. The book begins obviously paranoid in viewing what happens to Job as part of a cosmic conspiracy in which by implication we are all involved. Here there is the belief in a heavenly accuser who is out to get him.

And Yhwh said to the satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from

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<sup>20</sup> Mills, Lacan on paranoid knowledge, 31.

<sup>21</sup> For the characteristic symptoms, see the DSM-IV-TR: Paranoid Personality Disorder: Diagnostic criteria, BehaveNet, Retrieved November 17, 2012.

evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause” (Job 2:3).

Here the notion of the cosmic conspiracy against Job is more a possession of the book’s narrator than of Job himself, who knows nothing of what transpired between Yhwh and his prosecuted. The wisdom spoken by the character Job himself can be classified as partly paranoid,<sup>22</sup> since his fear of Yhwh involves that he suspects, without in the story having any sufficient basis, that others are exploiting, harming, or deceiving him. Job is at times preoccupied with what may be seen as unjustified doubts about the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends or associates and often reads hidden demeaning or threatening meanings into benign remarks or events. He persistently bears grudges, i.e., is unforgiving of insults, injuries, or slights and perceives attacks on his character or reputation that are not always apparent to others. Job is also quick to react angrily or to counterattack and his exaggerations sometimes exhibit full-blown paranoia with its theology of divine persecution:

He has put my brethren far from me,  
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.  
My kinsfolk and my close friends have failed me;  
the guests in my house have forgotten me;  
my maidservants count me as a stranger;  
I have become an alien in their eyes (Job 19:13-15).

Job’s ego organization is besieged by the horrors of persecutory-annihilation anxiety. Given the plethora of images and fantasies that populate the early stages of the imaginary, it becomes increasingly clearer to see how the other becomes a persecutory object. While Freud used the term ‘other’, referring to the other person and to otherness, Lacan’s use is closer to Hegel’s, especially by his lordship and bondage chapter outlined in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>23</sup> For Hegel, one’s sense of self is contingent on the recognition of the other, and this contingency itself fosters a paranoid dynamic based on fear, as is also apparent in the exchange of wisdom between Job and his friends. Job seeks the kind of recognition which is a basic human need. His ego is affirmed by the Other, but not at first. There is originally the experience of inequality vis-à-vis the deity, which is analogous to how Hegel saw the servant’s relation to the master.

For the thing that I **fear** comes upon me,  
and what I dread befalls me (Job 3:25).  
Then I would speak without **fear** of him,  
for I am not so in myself (Job 9:35).  
Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;  
you will be secure, and will not **fear** (Job 11:9).  
Their houses are safe from **fear**,  
and no rod of God is upon them (Job 21:9).

<sup>22</sup> What follows correlates neatly with recognized symptoms for paranoia, cf. Paranoid personality disorder – *International Statistic Classificaton of Diseases and Health Related Problems*, 10<sup>th</sup> Revision (CD 10). Of course, some might argue that the paranoid aspects of Job’s sagely personality is due to trauma rather than due to pathological elements in wisdom. However, the fact is that Job is represented as an exemplar of a wise person and in this case represents how the wise responds to anomalies in the system in a wise manner.

<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia contributors. Jacques Lacan [Internet]. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia; n.p. [cited 3 Dec 2012]. Online: from:[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jacques\\_Lacan&oldid=525898446](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jacques_Lacan&oldid=525898446).

Is it for your **fear** of him that he reproves you,  
and enters into judgment with you?

Dominion and **fear** are with God;  
he makes peace in his high heaven (Job 25:2).

And he said to man,  
'Behold, the **fear** of Yhwh, that is wisdom;  
and to depart from evil is understanding' (Job 28:28).

...because I stood in great **fear** of the multitude,  
and the contempt of families terrified me,  
so that I kept silence, and did not go out of doors (Job 31:34).

Therefore men **fear** him;  
he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit (Job 37:24).

Ultimately the desire for recognition becomes a fundamental battle for dominance and validation in which each subject struggles to overcome the objectification of the other. Job indeed comes to be seen as a persecutory object in relation to the Other.

Why do you, like God, pursue me?  
Why are you not satisfied with my flesh? (Job 19:22)

The Other, and particularly the Other's desire, is always a potential threat to Job the subject because Yhwh is an alien force that stands in firm opposition to him. There is a perceived antithesis that evokes rivalry and competition.

He has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass,  
and he has set darkness upon my paths.  
He has stripped from me my glory,  
and taken the crown from my head.  
He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,  
and my hope has he pulled up like a tree.  
He has kindled his wrath against me,  
and counts me as his adversary.  
His troops come on together;  
they have cast up siegeworks against me,  
and encamp round about my tent (Job 19:8-12).

If someone spoke like this in our day standard psychiatric classification is likely to diagnose paranoid personality disorder (if not of the psychotic variety). However, apologists for biblical ideology who present themselves as proponents of cross-cultural psychology seek to depathologize biblical personalities (e.g. Bruce Malina & John Pilch) to the extent that we fail to realize how we tend to employ double standards in evaluation when it comes to then and now. The bottom line is that it can't be denied that the Joban subject encounters wisdom in the face of an *opposition* – an opposition that *desires*. And for Lacan the object of human interest is the object of the other's desire.<sup>24</sup> What the subject desires in otherness is the Other's desire, thus bringing about a primordial confrontation with death: in opposition there is always the possibility of being annulled.

Does not he see my ways,  
and number all my steps?...

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<sup>24</sup> Mills, Lacan on paranoiac knowledge, 32.



what then shall I do when God rises up?  
 When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?  
 For I was in terror of calamity from God,  
 and I could not have faced his majesty (Job 30:4, 14, 23).

The dialectic of the Joban unconscious always implies struggle, the impossibility of coexistence with the other [is] one of its possibilities.<sup>25</sup> Whether the other is the object of desire that enjoys a degree of liberty which the subject lacks, or whether the Other is the sages' symbolic order imposing an austere reality on the Joban subject's inner world through the violation and demands of speech, the acquisition of knowledge becomes a paranoid enterprise.

### Qohelet and the Desire not to Know

The knowledge in wisdom is basically paranoid also in Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) in that its subject has regressed to that paranoid state whenever he expresses an extreme awareness of contingency. From many possible examples, the following text sums it up nicely:

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, in order that men should **fear** before him....I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show them that they are but beasts. For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? (Eccl 3:14, 18-21).

While the terrifying part-object experiences of the dislocated body arise in the imaginary, the symbolic register introduces another form of fragmentation.<sup>26</sup> Desire and speech by their very nature impose a command.

For when dreams increase, empty words grow many: but do you **fear** God (Eccl 5:7).

It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand; for he who **fears** God shall come forth from them all (Eccl 7:18).

The end of the matter; all has been heard. **Fear** God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man (Eccl 12:13).

Qohelet's knowledge is saturated with paranoia because it threatens to invade the subject, and it is precisely this knowledge that must be defended against as the desire not to know.<sup>27</sup> And while Qohelet claims one cannot know, this might as well be a case of not wanting to know either. Qohelet's wisdom is both obsessed with knowing and with denying the possibility thereof:

For who **knows** what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? (Eccl. 6:12).

For he does not **know** what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? (Eccl 8:7).

<sup>25</sup> Mills, Lacan on paranoid knowledge, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Mills, Lacan on paranoid knowledge, 33.

<sup>27</sup> See Mark Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes – a Social Scientific Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), on Qohelet as a regression into pessimism to cope with a hostile world.

However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to **know**, he cannot find it out (Ecc 8:17).

But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate man does not **know**. Everything before them is vanity (Ecc 9:1).

For man does not **know** his time. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them (Ecc 10:12).

A fool multiplies words,  
though no man **knows** what is to be,  
and who can tell him what will be after him? (Ecc 10:14).

Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you **know** not what evil may happen on earth (Ecc 11:2).

As you do not **know** how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not **know** the work of God who makes everything (Ecc 11:5).

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand; for you do not **know** which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good (Ecc 11:6).

Lacan would say that in agnosis there is a more fundamental unconscious that wish not to know any of the harsh realities of life.

For in much wisdom is much vexation,  
and he who increases **knowledge** increases sorrow (Ecc 1:18).

If a man begets a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things, and also has no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better off than he. For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; moreover it has not seen the sun **or known anything**; yet it finds rest rather than he (Ecc 6:3-4).

Qohelet shows that wisdom in general is unable to engage in too much self-examination and change. The agnostic sage himself might not have any desire to know the root of his or her own pathological symptoms or neurotic mechanisms, what functions his or her defences serve, and why these are instituted in the first place.<sup>28</sup> The result is a 'sick soul' (William James) or depressive state such as the one Qohelet seems to exemplify. Yet Lacan insisted that knowers do not want to give up their symptoms because even pessimism may provide familiarity and meaning. Qohelet himself witnesses to this paradox of desire:

All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, 'I will be wise'; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? (Ecc 7:23-24).

In this text, wisdom is revealed to approximate what Lacan calls the amorphous *objet petit a*. Joyful wisdom is singular in that for Qohelet it can literally only be seen from afar. Wisdom can only operate its fascination upon individuals who bear a partial perspective upon it, it is that object that 're-presents' the subject within the world of objects that it takes itself to be a wholly 'external' perspective upon. If a subject thus happens upon it too directly, it disappears.<sup>29</sup> What this indicates is that for Qohelet, wisdom as the *objet petit a*, or at least the fascinating effect the object which bears it has upon the subject who is under its thrall, has no 'objective' reality independently of the subject.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Mills, Lacan on paranoid knowledge, 34.

<sup>29</sup> On the concept of the *objet petit a*, see the relevant section in Matthew Sharpe, Jacques Lacan, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.p. [cited: 2 December 2012], online: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/lacweb/>

The logical consequence of this, as Lacan stipulates, is that this supposedly 'lost' object (here: wisdom) can never really have been lost by the subject, since he or she can never have possessed it in the first place.<sup>30</sup> Qohelet's contradictions bear this out. Thus from a Lacanian perspective, wisdom is by definition an object that comes into being only by being lost. In Qohelet full wisdom resists articulation because it is simply 'the impossible,' thus subjecting consciousness to the paranoid abyss of the ineffable.<sup>31</sup> Still every now and again the deity returns as the repressed judge and it is with reference to this persecuting hidden ultimate reality that Qohelet recommends 'fear'. So even though knowing wisdom is felt to be beyond him, Qohelet cannot stop pursuing it. This even though there is ultimately no safety in the unknown, and that is why the phenomenology of the lived experience in Qohelet carries with it the paranoiac residue of the uncertainty of the life within.<sup>32</sup>

From this standpoint, the quest for wisdom is revealed to be partly sadomasochistic: personified, Lady Wisdom inflicts a perverse pleasure through suffering at her own hands. There is a self-destructive element to the enjoyment of wisdom in Qohelet, a sort of revelry in the realm of excess to the point that truth or knowledge must be suspended, disavowed, or denied.<sup>33</sup> This is why for Qohelet and for Lacan, all knowledge becomes tainted with paranoia: they definitely threatened Qohelet's *jouissance* (another Lacanian term), and this was defended via developing the desire not to know, manifesting itself in a theologically realist agnosticism.

### Concluding Reflections

In this article, what might possibly be considered to be the blind-spot of biblical wisdom as rooted in the fear of Yhwh was identified. It was argued that if as many texts in the Hebrew Bible state a) wisdom somehow does involve the fear of Yhwh, and that b) knowledge of some sort was held to be a necessary condition or essential property of wisdom, and that c) all knowledge is essentially paranoiac as Lacanian psycho-epistemology suggests, then we may reasonably conclude that the beginning of wisdom is, amongst other things, paranoia.

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<sup>30</sup> Sharpe, Jacques Lacan, n.p.

<sup>31</sup> Sharpe, Jacques Lacan, n.p.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Mills, Lacan on paranoiac knowledge, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Mills, Lacan on paranoiac knowledge, 34.

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