

The Paradoxes of Fear in the Hebrew Bible

MATTHEW RICHARD SCHLIMM

University of Dubuque

mschlimm@dbq.edu

Many researchers argue that fear is a universal human emotion.¹ Scholars frequently describe it as small number of basic emotions (other ones include happiness, sadness, anger, and surprise).² As a primary emotion, fear is understood as hardwired into the human brain. Our minds' neurological circuitry has dedicated channels that cause us to quickly and innately sense danger and respond rapidly.³ From an evolutionary standpoint, fear has obvious advantages. People who rapidly sense danger are more likely to avoid threats than those who go tumbling forward unaware.⁴

Even if fear is a universal part of human experience, cultures differ widely in how they handle this emotion.⁵ Segments of American cul-

¹ An excellent article reviewing literature on the universal and cultural aspects of emotion, including fear, is James A. Russell, "Culture and the Categorization of Emotions," *Psychological Bulletin* 110/3 (1991): 426–50.

² See especially the work of Paul Ekman and Robert Plutchik. On the legacy of Ekman, see David Matsumoto, "Paul Ekman and the Legacy of Universals," *Journal of Research in Personality* 38/1 (2004): 45–51. On the legacy of Plutchik, see Ross Buck and Keith Oatley, "Robert Plutchik (1927–2006)," *American Psychologist* 62/2 (2007): 142.

³ See Joseph LeDoux, "The Emotional Brain, Fear, and the Amygdala," *Cellular and Molecular Neurobiology* 23 (2003): 727–38.

⁴ For more on the connection between evolution and fearing specifically God, see Dominic Johnson, *God Is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵ On the ways in which emotions are culturally specific, see Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 19–34, cf. 35–47. Thomas Kazen makes a similar point

ture, for example, embrace machismoism. There is a driving conviction that men should be strong, tough, courageous, and self-reliant. Within these segments of American culture, there is a whole host of negative names associated with people who show fear: weakling, pansy, coward, scaredy-cat, sissy, and chicken, just to name a few. These segments of American culture teach children that fear should not be displayed. Becoming an adult means putting fears aside. Apart from horror movies, there are few outlets for expressing fears publically.

In fact, when a beloved American Senator, John McCain, recently died, his daughter spoke at his funeral. She said, “As a girl, I didn’t appreciate what I most fully appreciate now—how he suffered and how he bore it with a stoic silence that was once the mark of an American man.”⁶ Notice what she said there. Of all the qualities she could have said that she most appreciated about her dad, she talked about his “stoic silence” when suffering. Meghan McCain did not praise her father for articulating the depth of his sorrows or for giving voice to the fears that naturally come in moments of suffering. It was rather her father’s ability to remain calm, cool, collected, emotionless, and ultimately silent that she appreciated. Such words are all the more remarkable, given that her father suffered both as a prisoner of war earlier in life and as a victim of brain cancer later in life.

Anthropologists talk of “emotional styles.”⁷ By this term, they refer to the language, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, expectations, and norms that cultures construct around emotions.⁸ The emotional style that

regarding humanitarian behavior (being both “rooted in the neurobiological constitution of human beings” and “shaped by culture”; see his “Emotional Ethics in Biblical Texts: Cultural Construction and Biological Bases of Morality,” *HBAI* 6 [2017]: 431–56, here 440, <https://doi.org/10.1628/219222717x15235367195631>).

⁶ Veronica Stracqualursi, “Meghan McCain Contrasts Father’s Legacy with Trump’s ‘Cheap Rhetoric,’” *CNN*, 1 Sept. 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/01/politics/meghan-mccain-john-mccain-funeral/index.html>.

⁷ See Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

⁸ It is especially important to keep emotional styles in mind, given that, as Françoise

many Americans have constructed around fear is fairly obvious from what I have already shared. Fear is associated with sub-human, animal behavior, so that if you are afraid, you're a scaredy-cat or chicken. You might not even be an animal, but rather a frail flower as the term "pansy" suggests. According to the logic of this emotional style, fear reduces the frightened person to a weakling: someone whose lack of strength is their defining quality. In the unfortunate event one feels fear despite immense societal pressures, the best one can do is experience this emotion privately. Hopefully, one will conquer it by facing whatever causes the fear.

This American emotional style is not the only possible one that can be or has been constructed around fear. Anthropologists working with peoples in the Southwest Pacific have encountered cultures that do not disparage fear but actually celebrate it. A common practice in these cultures is to tell stories of feeling afraid. Instead of being dismissed as cowards, people speaking of their fears receive respect. They make themselves vulnerable in revealing their fears, but this vulnerability creates communal bonds. These people communicate to others that they themselves need not be feared because they too sometimes feel afraid. The storytellers show that they are not a threat. Storyteller and listener are made one through their common humanity, which naturally entails sometimes feeling fear. Instead of marginalizing, animalizing, or dehumanizing people who feel afraid, people in these cultures appreciate and relate to those with experiences of this emotion.⁹

So, what we find, then, is that while fear is a fairly universal emotion, cultures can construct very different attitudes, judgments, and be-

Mirguet points out, "The experiences [evoked by words like אִירָא] exceed what we call emotions, as they also include actions (ritual, legal, etc.) and bodily sensations" ("What Is an 'Emotion' in the Hebrew Bible? An Experience that Exceeds Most Contemporary Concepts," *BibInt* 24 [2016]: 442–65, here 455, see also 450–51).

⁹ Catherine A. Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll & Their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 184–85; Robert I. Levy, Tahitians: *Mind and Experience in the Society Islands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 307–308.

haviors around that same basic emotion. Certainly, the Bible presents fear in a very different light than many modern societies. It links fear with religion. As Daniel Castelo puts it, “When one looks at the Old Testament especially, there is no more pronounced claim within the canon as to how believers are to relate to their God than in the ‘fear of the Lord.’”¹⁰ In fact, biblical teaching about fear raises many questions. There are four questions I wish to address here:

The first is a preliminary question. What characterizes biblical fear? Is it best described in terms of perceived physiological symptoms? Is there another characteristic that lies at the heart of this emotion?

The second question relates to what exactly people fear when they fear God. What makes God frightening? Is the sheer size, grandeur, and majesty of God frightening in comparison with human finitude? Is the fear that God will judge our actions? Is the fear that God may be cruel and harm us for no reason?

Third, why do some traditions within the Bible emphasize the goodness of fearing God? What could possibly be the upside to feeling afraid of God?

Lastly, why is there a strong biblical emphasis on fearing God when the Bible so frequently tells people *not* to be afraid?

CHARACTERIZING BIBLICAL FEAR

Is there a perceived physiological experience that may lie at the heart of biblical fear? It can be difficult to tell with precision. Biblical texts sometimes prize brevity and concision, meaning they do not always describe everything a frightened character experiences. Some texts equate feelings of fear with shaking and trembling (e.g., Deut 2:25; Micah 7:17). It is even possible that many biblical words for fear originally related in some

¹⁰ Daniel Castelo, “The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2/1 (2008): 147–60, here 148.

way to trembling or being short of breath.¹¹ Other texts say that the hearts of frightened people “melt.”¹² At different times, the Bible says that the frightened person is frozen in fear, becoming quiet and still.¹³ This diverse range of feelings actually aligns with what scientists have found. Those studying emotion have found that people who experience an emotion do not always perceive the same physiological symptom, even when they are from the same culture.¹⁴ Analyses of perceived physiological symptoms can be illuminating, but these symptoms are not always uniform, particularly in the case of fear. Furthermore, emotions appear to entail more than simply a feeling.

Over the past two decades, researchers from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology have reached similar conclusions, namely, that emotions entail judgments the brain makes about what we care about but cannot control. There is debate over whether emotions are *primarily* feelings, evaluations, or motivations, but most researchers acknowledge some place for cognitive perceptions.¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. H. F. Fuhs, “יָרֵעַ yārē’, יִרְאָה yir’á; מוֹרָא mōrā’,” *TDOT* 6:290–315, here 291; H.-P. Stähli, “יִרְאָה yir’ to fear,” *TLOT* 2:568–78, here 570.

¹² The Hebrew typically uses a verb from the root מָסַח (“melt”) and the noun לֵב/לִבָּב (“heart”). See Deut 1:28; 20:8; Josh 2:11; 5:1; 7:5; 2 Sam 17:10; Ps 22:15[14]; Isa 13:7; 19:1; Ezek 21:12[7]; Nah 2:11[10].

¹³ Exod 15:16; Ps 76:9[8]; cf. Ps 4:5[4]; Amos 5:13.

¹⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 97; Schlimm, *From Fratricide*, 83. Note also the following works, which show that fear can be associated with a variety of physiological symptoms in biblical literature: Julie B. Deluty, “The Embodiment of Fear in Ugaritic and Semitic Literature: Re-examining the Social Dynamic,” *Arc* 40 (2012): 69–91, esp. 79–83; Paul A. Krüger, “A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Fear in the Hebrew Bible,” *JNSL* 27/2 (2001): 77–89, esp. 80–85.

¹⁵ See especially Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*; Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). While I emphasize the cognitive aspects of biblical fear in this paper, my intent is not to say that affective dimensions are absent (a move that some scholars have erroneously made; see the helpful article Bill T. Arnold, “The Love-Fear Antinomy in Deuteronomy 5–11,” *VT* 61 [2011]: 551–69, here 565–67). Rather, I seek to make the case that interpreters can learn much from these cognitive dimensions.

Certainly, there is an emerging consensus that emotions are not irrational phenomena they once were equated with.¹⁶

How then do emotions entail cognitive judgments? It's helpful to think about specific emotions. Happiness arises when our minds perceive that something good has happened in our lives. On the other hand, sadness envelops us when our brains perceive the loss of something important. When our minds judge that someone has committed a wrong against ourselves or those close to us, we naturally feel angry. Whatever the physical sensations that may arise with a given emotion, there tends to be a cognitive judgment at the heart of most emotions in most people.

In the case of fear, our brains perceive some sort of potential threat in our environment. An event we do not want to occur seems imminent. It might be a threat that never materializes. It might be something that initially seems scary but then turns out to be harmless. Children, for example, might fear the dark or a monster because they do not have enough experience to realize that they can be perfectly safe in the dark and that monsters do not exist. From their limited view of the world, however, their fear makes sense. At its heart, fear comes from the mental judgment that we face a potential threat.

Does the Hebrew Bible similarly present emotions as operating according to mental judgments? Even though there is an academic consensus about the cognitive dimension of emotions, it is important to ask such a question. As noted earlier, emotions have both universal dimensions and locally defined associations. As such, we want to ensure that something we think is universal is in fact universal and not a culturally bound dimension of emotion we presume is present everywhere.

When the Hebrew Bible talks about fear, it most commonly uses the verb *ירא*, meaning “to fear” or “to be afraid,” as well as the related adjective *ירא*, meaning “afraid,” and the nouns *יראה* and *מורא*, both of which

¹⁶ Schlimm, *From Fratricide*, 35–47.

can be translated “fear.” These words appear 419 times in the Bible.¹⁷ There are approximately 150 times when the Bible uses these words to talk about people fearing other people.¹⁸ In nearly every case, the people who fear are faced with a potential threat. One of the first instances of a human fearing another human comes in Genesis 32. Jacob approaches his homeland, which he fled decades earlier upon learning that his brother Esau wanted to kill him. As Jacob gets close, Esau advances with 400 men. Jacob is terrified. He perceives that not only he but his entire family may die. He prays to God, “Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid [יִרָא] of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children” (Gen 32:12[11 NRSV]). Clearly, Jacob perceives a threat, which causes his fear.

In over a dozen cases, biblical characters do not fear other individuals but an aspect of creation.¹⁹ Amos writes, “The lion has roared. Who

¹⁷This number includes Ps 9:21[20], which spells מורא as מורה.

¹⁸I say “approximately” because there are some cases where the object of fear is unclear. For example, when God commands Jacob not to be afraid to go down to Egypt in Gen 46:3, it is unclear whether God issues this command to calm Jacob’s fears of harsh desert conditions, the difficulty of travel when advanced in age, or threats from human beings such as robbers while traveling.

Verses where the frightened entity appears to fear a human being include Gen 9:2; 26:7; 31:31; 32:8[7], 12[11]; 43:18, 23; 50:19, 21; Exod 2:14; 14:10, 13; Lev 19:3; Num 12:8; 14:9; 21:34; Deut 1:21, 29; 2:4, 25; 3:2, 22; 7:18–19; 11:25; 20:1, 3, 8; 28:10; 31:6, 8; Josh 4:14; 8:1; 9:24; 10:2, 8, 25; 11:6; Judg 4:18; 6:27; 7:3, 10; 8:20; Ruth 3:11; 1 Sam 3:15; 7:7; 15:24; 17:11, 24; 18:12, 29; 21:13[12]; 22:23; 23:3, 17; 28:5, 13; 2 Sam 3:11; 9:7; 10:19; 12:18; 13:28; 14:15; 1 Kgs 1:50–51; 3:28; 2 Kgs 1:15; 6:16; 10:4; 19:6; 25:24, 26; 1 Chr 22:13; 28:20; 2 Chr 20:3, 15, 17; 32:7, 18; Neh 2:2; 4:8[14]; 6:9, 13–14, 16, 19; Job 5:21; 32:7; Ps 3:7[6]; 27:1, 3; 49:6[5], 17[16]; 55:6[5]; 56:4–5[3–4], 12[11]; 64:5[4]; 72:5; 91:5; 112:7–8; 118:6; Isa 7:4; 8:12; 10:24; 18:2, 7; 35:4; 37:6; 40:9; 41:10, 13–14; 43:5; 51:7, 12; 54:4, 14; Jer 1:8; 23:4; 26:21; 30:10; 40:9; 41:18; 42:11, 16; 46:27–28; 51:46; Lam 3:57; Ezek 2:6; 3:9; 11:8; Dan 1:10; Joel 2:21–22; Hab 1:7; Hag 2:5; Zeph 3:15–16.

¹⁹These verses (with objects of fear in parentheses) include Gen 46:3 (traveling); Deut 1:19 (desert); 8:15 (desert); 1 Kgs 17:13 (famine); Job 5:22 (wild beasts); Ps 46:3[2] (changing earth); Prov 31:21 (snow); Eccl 12:5 (heights, roadside terrors); Isa 7:25 (briars and thorns); 21:1 (desert); 43:1 (waters and fire); Jer 17:8 (heat); Amos 3:8 (lion); Jonah 1:5 (storm).

is not frightened?” (3:8).²⁰ Ecclesiastes 12:5 talks of the fear of heights, which is quite understandable given the unforgiving nature of gravity. Deuteronomy talks about the desert as a fearsome place (1:19; 8:15), and there is no doubt from the lack of water, the lack of food, and the encompassing death described in the book of Numbers that the wilderness poses ample threats. Isaiah 7:25 says that people will avoid certain hills because they fear the briars and thorns present. In a culture where boots were rare and denim had not yet been invented, the threat posed by this vegetation is apparent. So, we can safely say that when biblical characters fear people or elements of creation, they perceive a threat.

FEARING GOD

What then about God? When people fear God, what exactly are they fearing? In what way does God pose a threat for human beings?²¹

The Numinous

One of the most important works ever written on the fear of God is Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*.²² It talks of God in terms of the numinous: when faced with all of the mystery and greatness of God,

²⁰ This translation is found in Göran Eidevall, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 24G (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 81. Job 5:22 similarly talks about fear of wild animals. Although Eliphaz talks about not needing to fear wild animals, the implication is that ordinarily they would be the object of fear.

²¹ In what follows, I explicitly differ from a driving conviction found in Jason A. Fout's article "What Do I Fear When I Fear My God? A Theological Reexamination of a Biblical Theme," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9 (2015): 23–38. Fout maintains, "The fear of God as found in Scripture is *not* best understood by analogy with the typical human emotion of fear" (35, italics mine). To the contrary, I argue that there *is* an analogy to human emotion, and it centers on the cognitive dimension of fear, namely, the perception of a potential threat.

²² Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey, revised with additions (London: Oxford University Press, 1936).

human beings encounter the holy—something beyond us and beyond our modes of understanding, something that we are simultaneously attracted to and repelled from. The idea of being repelled away certainly seems to have connections with a fear of the divine. Otto himself uses the term *mysterium tremendum*, and he defines this expression by talking about the emotion of fear.²³

There certainly are moments when the Bible describes people as fearing God, and their fear seems related to something like the phenomenon that Otto has described.²⁴ At the foot of a wild and windy mountain, the Israelites encounter God, who gives them the Ten Commandments. Amid thunder, lightning, fire, and smoke, they—like Isaiah during his calling—fear for their lives. They withdraw while Moses alone enters into the smoke to speak with God (see Exod 20:20; Deut 5:5). The idea is that God's presence is so magnificent, so grand, so powerful, so threatening that people cannot help but stand in fearful awe of it. We often talk about fear of the unknown, and there is much about God that is unknown. When adults encounter something beyond

²³ Ibid., 12–14. Otto uses this term because he seeks to describe a lexical gap in English (ibid., 7). Additional characteristics of this term include feeling [1] “nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (ibid., 10), [2] the uncanny and sublime (ibid., e.g., 17), [3] the “absolute overpoweringness” of the divine (ibid., 19), [4] “the ‘urgency’ or ‘energy’ of the numinous object” (ibid., 23), and [5] “the *stupor* before something ‘wholly other’” (ibid., 26, italics his). Although Moberly rightly warns against imposing inappropriate categories onto the text (R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 91), Otto's ideas have much in common with the Bible. The totality of ideas conveyed by words from the root אָרַח is not exhausted by Otto, but Otto's thinking is clearly inspired by particular Old Testament passages.

²⁴ Otto's influence can be clearly seen in Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vols., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961–67), 2:268–77; Vernon H. Kooy, “The Fear and Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Grace upon Grace: Essays in Honor of Lester J. Kuyper*, ed. James I. Cook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 106–116, here 109. While I have chosen Otto's work as a point of departure, my focus here is more on fear of the mysterious than the schemes of diachronic development found in Otto's or Eichrodt's works (cf. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 88–91).

their frame of reason—something mysterious and supernatural—they naturally sense that threats may be present and feel some element of fear.

A recurrent biblical question is, Who can behold the face of God and live?²⁵ With that question lingering in the minds of countless biblical characters, threat to one's life accompanies encounters with the divine, and threats lead to fear. So, biblical evidence exists suggesting that the fear of God—at least sometimes—entails a fear of the holy and the supernatural.

We frequently find this idea referenced when the Bible uses a Niphal participle of ירא (e.g., נורא) to describe God and God's works. This word is usually translated “awesome.” However, the sense of the word has more to do with the original meaning of awesome—that is, “awe-inspiring” or “frightening”—than with contemporary uses of “awesome” (i.e., a synonym of “cool”). Forty four times, the Hebrew Bible uses this form of the verb that means “frightening.”²⁶ Repeatedly, the Bible describes God's miraculous defeat of the Egyptian army at the Sea of Reeds as frightening.²⁷ In the book of Joel, we read, “The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and frightening day of the Lord” (Joel 3:4 [2:31 translation mine]).

Remarkably, over one-third of the times that the Hebrew Bible uses this verbal adjective that means “frightening,” it also uses the Hebrew adjective גדול, meaning “great.”²⁸ The text envisions greatness that over-

²⁵ Cf. Gen 16:13; 32:31[30]; Exod 3:6; 19:21; 20:19; 24:10–11; 33:20, 23; Deut 4:33; 5:24–26; Judg 6:22–23; 13:22–23; 1 Sam 6:19; 1 Kgs 19:13; Isa 6:5; John 1:18.

²⁶ On both this translation of the participle and its connections with the numinous, see Fuhs, *TDOT* 6:300; Stähli, *TLOT* 2:571.

²⁷ Exod 15:11; cf. Deut 10:21; 1 Chr 17:21; Ps 106:22.

²⁸ There are 17 verses that contain both a *niphal* participle of ירא and the adjective גדול: Deut 1:19; 7:21; 8:15; 10:17, 21; 1 Chr 16:25; Neh 1:5; 4:8; 9:32; Ps 47:3[2]; 96:4; 99:3; Dan 9:4; Joel 2:11; 3:4[2:31]; Mal 1:14; 3:23[4:5]; cf. Josh 4:14; 1 Sam 12:24; 2 Sam 7:23; 1 Chr 17:21; Ps 145:6; Joel 2:21. These verses offer exceptionally strong support to Otto's repeated insistence that encounters with the numinous involve

whelms human beings, making them feel puny, allowing them to see how little they really know and how vast and powerful God really is. The attraction between the verbal construction meaning “frightening” and this word meaning “great” is so strong that readers are over 17 times more likely to find the word “frightening” in a verse containing the word “great” than in a random verse from the Bible as a whole.²⁹ All in all, this type of divine fear relating to God’s greatness and mystery occurs approximately 20% of the time that the fear of God is referenced.³⁰ So, while the numinous does not provide the sole explanation of why humans fear God,³¹ the idea of God’s greatness, incomparability, and in-

a creature’s feeling “submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (*Idea of the Holy*, 10; cf. 13, 21, 40).

²⁹ Suppose a = the verses containing a *niphal* participle of אָרַי (of which there are 44), b = verses containing גָּדוֹל (of which there are 495), and HB = verses in the Hebrew Bible (excluding the Aramaic, of which there are 22,946). Then, using formulas from conditional probability, we find that a verse containing this participle is over 17 times more likely to appear in a verse with “great” (גָּדוֹל) in it than in a randomly selected verse from the Hebrew Bible as a whole (cf. Schlimm, *From Fratricide*, 185–92):

$$\frac{P(a|b)}{P(a|HB)} = \frac{n(a \cap b)}{n(b)} \div \frac{n(a)}{n(HB)} = \frac{n(a \cap b)}{n(b)} \times \frac{n(HB)}{n(a)} = \frac{n(a \cap b) \times n(HB)}{n(a) \times n(b)} = \frac{17 \times 22,946}{44 \times 495} \approx 17.9$$

³⁰ The following texts evoke ideas of the numinous by talking about God’s incomprehensibility, greatness, incomparability, and miraculous acts: Exod 3:6; 14:31; 15:11; 34:10; Deut 7:21; 10:17; Josh 4:24; 1 Sam 12:24; 2 Sam 7:23; 2 Kgs 17:36; 1 Chr 16:25; 17:21; Neh 1:5; 4:8[14]; 9:32; Job 37:22; Ps 2:11; 5:8[7]; 22:24[23]; 33:8; 45:5[4]; 47:3[2]; 64:10[9]; 66:5; 67:8[7]; 68:36[35]; 76:13[12]; 89:8[7]; 96:4; 99:3; 102:16[15]; 106:22; 111:9; 135:20; 145:6; Isa 8:13; 25:3; 64:2[3]; Jer 5:22; 10:7; 32:21; Dan 9:4; Joel 2:11; 3:4[2:31]; Mic 7:17; Zeph 2:11; Mal 1:14.

Some of these texts also hint at additional reasons to fear God. For example, Ps 64:10[9] talks about the works of God. These works are not only miraculous (and thus beyond human comprehension), but they also involve judgment against sinners, pointing to God’s threatening punishment.

³¹ Scholars sometimes argue that a single meaning lies behind the Bible’s accounts about fearing God (e.g., Fout, “What Do I Fear,” *passim*, e.g., 26). However, it is important to recognize that biblical texts are often quite diverse, and words frequently have multiple interrelated definitions. Methodologically, it does not work to examine a few texts—or even a few key texts—and argue that because they talk about fear in a certain sense, that sense is present in all biblical expressions about fear.

comprehensibility makes a significant mark on the Bible's portrayals of fear.³²

Retribution

In the Bible, the most common reason that people fear God stems from the perception that God will judge them for their sins.³³ This sort of sentiment may be behind as many as three-quarters of the Bible's 200+ references to divine fear.³⁴ Readers see this type of fear with crystal clari-

³² Jason A. Fout argues against understanding “the fear of God” in terms of the numinous. He writes, for example, “The phrase ‘the fear of God’ or ‘the fear of the Lord’ is never used to describe the human being overawed in God’s presence” (“What Do I Fear,” 28). While Fout’s observation is technically correct, the phrases *יראת אלהים* (“the fear of God”) and *יראת יהוה* (“the fear of the Lord”) only show up 25 times in the Hebrew Bible. That’s only 6% of the time that a word from the root *ירא* is used in the Bible. As this article shows, there are many instances where people do fear God in the sense of being overawed by God’s presence.

³³ Some scholars have debated whether biblical fear of God is an emotion or simply a reference to obedience (e.g., Fout, “What Do I Fear,” 25). I prefer not to make such a distinction and wonder if it is a false dichotomy. As evidenced in the next footnote, fearing God frequently correlates with obeying God. It is, however, difficult to decide whether an emotion is present for at least two reasons. First, such a decision depends in large part on how precisely the term “emotion” is defined and whether this term is understood prototypically or technically. Second, it can be difficult to say whether an emotion is present because many biblical texts give only limited access to characters’ interior feelings (e.g., Gen 22). Here, it is sufficient to note that a key conceptual component of fear in the Bible is perceiving a potential threat, and biblical descriptions of fearing God usually involve awareness of at least a potential threat, whether that threat involves God’s encroaching grandeur, inscrutability, justice, or wrath.

³⁴ Fearing God is strongly connected with either obeying God, being faithful to God, doing the right thing, or seeking to avoid God’s punishments in Gen 3:10; 18:15; 20:8, 11; 22:12; 42:18; Exod 1:17, 21; 9:20, 30; 18:21; 20:20; Lev 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43; Deut 4:10; 5:29; 6:2, 13, 24; 8:6; 10:12, 20; 13:5[4], 12[11]; 14:23; 17:19; 25:18; 28:58; 31:12–13; Josh 22:25; 24:14; 1 Sam 4:7; 12:14, 20, 24; 31:4; 2 Sam 23:3; 1 Kgs 8:40, 43; 18:3, 12; 2 Kgs 4:1; 17:25, 28, 32–34, 36, 39, 41; 1 Chr 17:21; 2 Chr 6:31, 33; 19:9; Neh 1:11; 5:9, 15; 7:2; Job 1:1, 8–9; 2:3; 4:6; 6:14; 9:35; 15:4; 22:4; 28:28; 37:24; Ps 15:4; 19:10[9]; 22:26[25]; 25:12, 14; 31:20[19]; 33:18; 34:8[7]; 34:10[9], 12[11]; 40:4[3]; 52:8[6]; 55:20[19]; 60:6[4]; 61:6[5]; 66:16; 76:8–9[7–8],

ty in the Psalms. In the 76th psalm, the person praying says to God, “You! You are frightening [נורא]! Who can stand before you when you are angry? From the heavens you announced judgment. The land feared [ירא] and became silent when God arose for justice, to save all the afflicted of the land” (76:8–10 [7–9 translation mine]).³⁵ Here, God’s anger is a clear expression of God’s passion for judgment and justice. The land perceives the threat that this angry God poses. The wicked fear because the day of judgment comes (cf. Ps 119:120).

In the book of Leviticus, the command to fear God immediately follows several commands. So, Leviticus 19:14 reads, “You must not insult a deaf person or put some obstacle in front of a blind person that would cause them to trip. Instead, fear your God; I am the Lord” (CEB). Here, the idea is that people should fear the punishment God will send on those who harm the disabled. The same phrases appear after people are commanded to honor the elderly (19:32), as well as after prohibitions against wronging another person (25:17), taking interest (25:36), and ruling over servants harshly (25:43). God should be feared because God will punish those who harm the disabled, the elderly, and the poor.

In the book of Genesis, Abraham worries that the Philistines will kill him to get his wife because, in his words, “there is no fear of God in this place” (Gen 20:11 NASB). Abraham here suggests that the Philistines do not believe that God will hold them accountable for their actions.

12–13[11–12]; 85:10[9]; 86:11; 90:11; 103:11, 13, 17; 111:5, 10; 112:1; 115:11, 13; 118:4; 119:38, 63, 74, 79, 120; 128:1, 4; 130:4; 145:19; 147:11; Prov 1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 13:13; 14:2, 26–27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; 24:21; 31:30; Eccl 3:14; 5:6[7]; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13; Isa 11:2–3; 29:13; 33:6; 50:10; 59:19; 63:17; Jer 5:24; 26:19; 32:39–32:40; 44:10; Hos 10:3; Jonah 1:9, 16; Hab 3:2; Zeph 3:7; Hag 1:12; Mal 1:6; 2:5; 3:5, 16; 3:20[4:2]; cf. 1 Sam 14:26; Jonah 1:10; Zech 8:13, 15.

³⁵ This verse obviously stands in contrast to Fout’s statement that the fear of God “is ... not to be understood primarily as ... a reaction to the anger of God” (“What Do I Fear,” 35). In fairness to Fout, he focuses on the Torah and Gospel of Matthew, not the Psalms. Nevertheless, it is important to note that his summary statement does not extend to the canon as a whole.

Elsewhere, texts make clear that God-fearers will avoid various types of wrongdoing because they fear what consequences God will send if they commit evil.³⁶

Other than Psalms, the book of the Bible that uses the words from the root ירא ("fear") most frequently is Deuteronomy.³⁷ More than half of Deuteronomy's references to fear talk specifically about fearing God.³⁸ It makes perfect sense that Deuteronomy of all books would emphasize fearing God so strongly. Anyone who has read the detailed and horrifying description of punishments in Deuteronomy 28 knows that this God isn't messing around when it comes to matters of obedience. This God poses a threat to anyone capable of breaking the terms of the covenant. God will ensure that justice comes. So, we can safely say that one of the most important things people fear when they fear God is the threat of God's justice.

Cruelty?

Should interpreters even go so far as to say that the biblical God is a "loose cannon" who may randomly strike people down for no reason at all? Does the Bible portray God as an oppressive, malevolent, or capricious deity who may threaten human beings for no reason?

In recent decades, biblical scholars have explored this idea in several publications. James Crenshaw looks at it in his book *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence*, as well as a

³⁶ Perhaps the most explicit text is Proverbs 16:6b: "And by the fear [יראה] of the Lord one keeps away from evil" (NASB). Knowing that evil actions lead to calamity, those who fear God embrace goodness. They know that God's covenant and instruction offer rewards to those most concerned with what God wants. Stähli, *TLOT*, 2:575, 577. See, e.g., Gen 42:18; Deut 31:12; Ps 25:14; 111:5.

³⁷ A treatment of the fear of God in these two books can be found in Patrick D. Miller, "Deuteronomy and Psalms: Evoking a Biblical Conversation," *JBL* 118 (1999): 3–18, here 15–16.

³⁸ In this number, I include elements closely related to God that the Israelites fear, such as the fire that encompasses God's presence.

chapter of his book *Defending God*.³⁹ Meanwhile, Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* devotes extensive time to portrayals of God as hidden, abusive, contradictory, unreliable, and irrational.⁴⁰ If biblical writers conceived of God in these ways, it seems that they would naturally fear such a deity. So, it raises the question, does the Bible speak explicitly about fearing God when God might be seen as an oppressive presence?

Amid the Bible's brutal honesty, people who suffer sometimes accuse God of somehow causing their pain. In this context, they can talk about their fears. So, Job speaks of feeling dread over how God has treated him (3:25; 6:4; 7:14; 9:28, 34; 13:21; 21:6; 23:15–16). Psalm 88 sounds a similar note. The psalmist addresses God and says, "I have been afflicted and near death since I was a youth. I carry a dread of you. I am helpless" (88:16 [15 translation mine]; cf. Ps 30:8[7]). Jeremiah makes a similar comment (17:17).

These verses, interestingly, avoid the typical language used to describe fearing God. As noted above, the verb ירא and its cognates show up over 400 times in the Bible. These verses in Job, Psalms, and Jeremiah, however, use other words.⁴¹ It may be that the idea of fearing God carried such positive connotations in ancient Israel that the normal word for "fear" did not work when biblical characters tried to express

³⁹ James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); idem, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55–71.

⁴⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 333–358 (hidden), 359–62 (abusive), 362–67 (contradictory), 367–72 (unreliable), 383–85 (irrational).

⁴¹ These words usually refer to an experience of dread or terror. They include אימה ("terror"), בעת ("terrify"), בעתה ("terror"), חתת ("be terrorized"), יגר ("dread"), מחתה ("terror"), פחד ("dread"), and פלצות ("horror"). While verses exist that contain both a word from the root ירא and one of these rough synonyms, these verses do not usually envision God acting with irrational cruelty. Instead, we find expressions like "Feel no fear, and feel no terror" (אֵל־תִּירָא וְאֵל־חַתָּה, Deut 1:21; Josh 8:1; 1 Chr 22:13; 28:20; cf. Deut 31:8; Josh 10:25; 2 Chr 20:15, 17; 32:7; Isa 51:7; Jer 23:4; 30:10; 46:27; Ezek 2:6; 3:9).

their concern that God seemed to treat them unfairly. In fact, when the normal word for “fear” is used to talk about God, it appears in verses like Psalm 103:11, which clearly does *not* present God as cruel. Instead, we read, “as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear [אָרַךְ] him” (NRSV).

At this point, it is useful to think about prototype theory. Cognitive linguists working with this theory argue that most people do not form mental categories on the basis of a set of essential qualities that every member of a set must have. Instead, when dealing with non-scientific fields, people’s thinking tends to operate with three types of members belonging to a given category. There are prototypical members: the very first thing people think of when they conceptualize a member of that category. There are non-prototypical members of categories, which people do not usually think of immediately but clearly belong in the category. Lastly, there are marginal members of categories that people would disagree about. The following table provides examples:

Category	Prototypical Member(s)	Less Central Member(s)	Marginal Member(s)
Chair	Kitchen Chair	Reclining Armchair, Wheelchair, Highchair	Barstool
Books of the Bible	Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Gospels, Romans	Job, Daniel, Obadiah	Tobit, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Baruch
Glove	Leather glove, ski glove, knit glove	Surgical glove, baseball glove, welding glove	Mitten

When it comes to fear in the Bible, there are some verses that suggest that some biblical characters perceive God as treating them with cruelty. They fear this deity because of how much they have suffered. However, this type of fear is not a prototypical example of fearing God in the Bible. Passages describing this kind of fear of God avoid fear’s most common language and vocabulary.⁴² This idea is emphasized in a few

⁴² In other words, if the prototypical category is experiences related to the word אָרַךְ, then perceptions of a haphazard and cruel God would be on the far margins.

books of the Bible like Job and Psalms, rather than across the canon as a whole. Prototypically, human beings fear God in the sense that they are frightened by God's greatness, God's mysterious nature, or God's justice. Fearing God for being cruel is not prototypical, certainly not a way that the word **אָרֵא** is normally employed.⁴³

THE GOODNESS OF FEAR

We come now to our third major question. Another noteworthy feature of the Bible is that fearing God is often a very good thing. We read several times in Proverbs and the Psalms that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10 NASB; cf. 1:7; 15:33; Ps 111:10). Isaiah 33:6 says that “the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure” (NRSV). Meanwhile, Nehemiah 1:11, Psalm 112:1, and Isaiah 11:3 all talk about the utter “delight” that comes from fearing God.⁴⁴

How on earth can delight—which suggests happiness—occur alongside fear—which suggests being under threat? Usually, I do not think of frightened people as operating at their fullest potential, much less embodying wisdom. So, how can fear exist alongside wisdom and delight?⁴⁵

⁴³ The canon as a whole thus strikes a delicate balance. On the one hand, it gives those who feel mistreated by God both the words and the permission to express their experiences. On the other hand, it upholds the goodness of fearing God by restricting usage of the word **אָרֵא**. This balance is important to keep in mind, given that the concept of fearing God can otherwise result in problematic thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, as noted by Pieter G.R. De Villiers, “Fear as Dread of a God who Kills and Abuses? About a Darker Side of a Key, But Still Forgotten Biblical Motif,” *HvTSt* 69/1 (2013): 1–9, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2018>; cf. Alvera Mickelsen, “Healthy and Unhealthy Fear of the Lord,” *Leadership* 6/2 (1985): 83–85.

⁴⁴ Castelo writes, “The ‘fear of the Lord,’ as a motif, suggests goodness (Ps 31:19), delight (Neh 1:11; Isa 11:3), praise (Ps 22:23), salvation (Ps 85:9), and life itself (Prov 14:27; 19:23)” (“Fear of the Lord,” 153). See also Sir 1:12: “The fear of the Lord delights the heart, and gives gladness and joy and long life” (NRSV).

⁴⁵ These questions are sharpened because, as Castelo puts it, “the Johannine literature is a (if not the) dominant voice in the minds of contemporary Christians so that when one reads, ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with

Fear and Blessing

Obviously, the type of fear envisioned in these passages is not dread of a capricious deity who will haphazardly harm random individuals.⁴⁶ Such terror could not lead to wisdom or delight. Rather, divine fear here relates to recognizing God's greatness and God's justice.⁴⁷ It helpfully allows people to avoid danger. Those who fear God realize the threats that come from disobedience. They know that evil actions eventually catch up with evildoers. With that knowledge—with that perception of a threat—they avoid disobedience. They choose obedience because they fear what will come otherwise.⁴⁸ In choosing obedience, they open themselves to all the blessings that come from faithfulness. As God says to humanity in Job 28:28, "Listen up: the fear of the Lord—that's wisdom. To depart from evil—that's understanding" (translation mine).

punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love' (1 John 4:18), the assumption can be drawn that fear is a negative disposition, one implying punishment and suggesting an innate incompatibility with love" ("Fear of the Lord," 148). Before taking 1 John 4:18 and moving in a Marcionite direction, however, one needs to reckon with divine fear as praised by several New Testament books (Matt 10:28; Luke 23:40; 2 Cor 5:11; Phil 2:12; Heb 10:31; 1 Pet 1:17).

⁴⁶ Thus, Bill Arnold argues that the discourse of Deut 5–11 intentionally brings together "love" and "fear" to teach ancient Israel that these emotions "are not, in fact, mutually exclusive, but complement each other, so that love prevents terror and fear prevents irreverent familiarity" ("The Love-Fear Antinomy," 567). This work is a helpful correction to earlier works such as that of Bernard J. Bamberger, who argues, "Fear and love of God refer not so much to an inward emotional state [as] to some type of overt action" ("Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament," *HUCA* 6 [1929]: 39–53, here 39).

⁴⁷ Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, Jennifer L. Koosed recognizes fear's positive attributes, writing, "Fear is a constituent part of other more positive emotions; fear is integral to relationship.... [F]ear and anxiety are, at least in part, products of love.... [T]he relationship between the people and their God is complex, multifaceted, and subject to all the vicissitudes of life itself" ("Moses: The Face of Fear," *BibInt* 22 [2014]: 414–29, here 426).

⁴⁸ Fout correctly observes, "the fear of God is not the hiatus of human agency but is properly central to it" ("What Do I Fear," 29).

Or, to use imagery present in a book like Proverbs, there are two paths.⁴⁹ One path is the way of goodness, righteousness, and justice. It leads to blessings and the good life. The other path is the path of wickedness that leads only to death. Fearing God means acknowledging that God, as creator, has built morality into the framework of creation. Evil leads to disaster. Goodness leads to blessing. The God-fearer avoids the evil path, trusts in God, and finds the simple and great rewards that come from faithfulness.

Fear and Learning

When the Bible talks about teaching and learning, one of the most common things to be taught and learned is how to fear God.⁵⁰ In Psalm 34, we read:

Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord. (34:12 [11 NRSV])

Next, this fear of God is taught, and the content of this teaching focuses on God's justice.⁵¹ First, readers learn how God brings goodness to the obedient:

Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?

⁴⁹ The word דרך ("way") appears approximately 70 times in the book of Proverbs, almost always to talk about either the "way" of wisdom or the "way" of folly (e.g., 1:15, 31; 2:8, 12–13, 20). Several synonyms get at similar ideas, such as מעגל ("track"), ארח ("path"), and מסלה ("highway"); see, e.g., Prov 1:19; 2:8–9, 13, 15, 18–20.

⁵⁰ Seven of 80 verses mentioning למד ("teach") also include either the word ירא, יראה, or מורא. Of the 46 verses where the verb ירה refers to teaching (see definition III of the word in *HALOT*), four verses contain ירא, יראה, or מורא: 2 Kgs 17:28; Ps 25:12; 45:5[4]; 86:11.

⁵¹ Translators frequently debate whether words referring to fearing God would be better translated as "revering God" (e.g., Castelo, "Fear of the Lord," 155). When reading the Bible takes place amid faith communities that place a premium on instruction, I prefer to talk about "fearing God" rather than merely "revering God." However, when the content of that fear cannot be taught, the language of "revering God" may be an imperfect but helpful substitute.

Keep your tongue from evil,
 and your lips from speaking deceit.
 Depart from evil, and do good;
 seek peace, and pursue it.
 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
 and his ears are open to their cry. (Ps 34:13–16 [12–15 NRSV])

Next, readers learn how God threatens the disobedient:

The face of the Lord is against evildoers,
 to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth...
 Evil brings death to the wicked,
 and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.
 (Ps 34:17, 22 [16, 21 NRSV])

To fear God means to live in awareness of this psalm's content: the righteous find God on their side while evildoers face death.⁵²

Fear and Learning

Frequently, the Bible equates fearing God with obeying all of God's commandments.⁵³ Deuteronomy 6:2 goes so far as to say, "You will fear

⁵² It has been claimed, "The idea of fearing God appears many times in the Bible but its content is nowhere explicitly articulated" (Job Y. Jindo, "On the Biblical Notion of Human Dignity: 'Fear of God' as a Condition for Authentic Existence," *BibInt* 19 (2011): 433–53, here 437). However, Psalm 34 appears to articulate this content quite clearly.

⁵³ David J. A. Clines writes, "My conclusion is that the **אָרַר** word group always signifies the emotion of fear (which is its sense or denotation), but that sometimes that emotion leads to actions (or avoidance of actions) of an ethical or cultic kind (which are then its reference or connotation). In brief, when people do not lie, for example, because of the 'fear of God', it does not mean that they do not lie because they behave ethically but because they are afraid of God and of the consequences he may exact of them for lying" ("The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom' [Job 28:28]: A Semantic and Contextual Study," in *Job 28: Cognition in Context*, ed. Ellen van Wolde [Leiden: Brill, 2003], 57–92, here 64). While I tend to agree with Clines, I also believe that metonymy can exert powerful influence within a language. In this case, a key component of obedience (i.e., fearing God, a motivation for obedience) can be used to speak about obedience as a whole. Furthermore, just as there are dead metaphors (that is, metaphors so worn out that their figurative qualities are not usually recognized), so there are also dead

the Lord your God by keeping all his regulations and his commandments” (CEB). Or, at the end of Ecclesiastes, in 12:13, we read, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone” (NRSV). The verse is not saying both to fear God and also to keep God’s commandments as though fear and commandment-keeping were two distinct parts of obedience. The two phrases refer to the same thing. Why should one fear God and keep commandments? The last verse of the book explains: “For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:14 NRSV).

Earlier, I described how fearing God entails not only acting with awareness of God’s justice, but also acting in awe of God’s greatness. That awe of God’s greatness also comes into play with obedience. Those who are awed by God’s greatness have their world rightly ordered.⁵⁴ God is over all—over creation, including oneself. The Bible warns repeatedly against idolatry, which involves exalting objects of creation too highly. It also warns against pride, which involves exalting oneself too highly. When holy reverence is kindled and one is aware of God’s greatness, then the temptations of idolatry and pride melt away.⁵⁵ In the light of God’s greatness, majesty, and holiness, individuals realize just how small they are, as well as the inadequacies of idols. The only appropriate attitude about oneself is humility.⁵⁶ Submission to God’s will no longer be-

metonyms. One cannot rule out the possibility that for some readers in some contexts, “the fear of the Lord” was simply a shorthand notation for obedience (cf. Jindo, “Human Dignity,” 434; Fuhs, *TDOT* 6:298). However, it is a mistake to think that the emotional qualities of the fear always recede completely into the background, especially when potential threats are usually present in one way or another (contra Bamberger, “Fear and Love,” 39).

⁵⁴ As Castelo (“Fear of the Lord,” 155) observes, “Both vulnerability and worship are two aspects to the biblical motif of ‘fearing God’ that ought to be continuously maintained in tandem.”

⁵⁵ Kooy also notes that fear of God is the antidote to idolatry (“Fear and Love,” 114).

⁵⁶ Cf. Castelo, “Fear of the Lord,” 157; Tremper Longman III, “The ‘Fear of God’ in the Book of Ecclesiastes,” *BBR* 25/1 (2015): 13–21, here 13–14; Jindo, “Human

comes oppressive. It becomes natural. Obedience is no longer about gritting one's teeth and trying harder. It's logical. As Proverbs 16:6 puts it, "by fearing the Lord, one departs from evil" (translation mine). In the light of God's greatness, a highly appropriate response is to praise God—to proclaim God's goodness before others.⁵⁷ Little wonder that Hebrew words for "praise" are 3 times more likely to appear in a verse that talks about "fear" than in a random verse from the Bible as a whole.⁵⁸ Initially, it might seem foolish for people to praise a God they are afraid of. However, the biblical idea of fear—which relates to God's grandeur and justice—naturally fits with praise.

The Folly of Fearing Humans

Fearing God also ensures that we avoid the theological pitfall of fearing other human beings, which repeatedly leads to disaster in the Bible. In 1 Samuel 15, King Saul is supposed to offer up to God all the spoils of battle. He fails to do so, and the prophet Samuel tells Saul that he will

Dignity," 452. Note also that Abigail Marsh, *The Fear Factor: How One Emotion Connects Altruists, Psychopaths, & Everyone In-Between* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), e.g., 253–54 finds close connections between altruistic behavior and humility, specifically while discussing the emotion of fear.

⁵⁷ For more on the connection between fearing and praising God, see Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:270–71.

⁵⁸ There are 11 verses that contain a reference to "fear" (ירא, יראה, or מורא) and a reference to "praise" (תהלה or הלל): Exod 15:11; Deut 10:21; 1 Chr 16:25; Ps 22:24[23], 26[25]; 40:4[3]; 56:5[4]; 96:4; 111:10; 112:1; Prov 31:30.

Suppose a = the verses containing ירא, יראה, or מורא (of which there are 419 [counting Ps 9:21(20), which spells מורא as מורה]), b = verses containing תהלה or the verb הלל when the verb refers to praise (see definition II of the word in *HALOT*; there are 177 of these verses), and HB = verses in the Hebrew Bible (excluding the Aramaic, of which there are 22,946). Then, using formulas from conditional probability, we find that a reference to "praise" (as defined here) is over 3 times more likely to appear in a verse mentioning "fear" (as defined here) than in a random verse from the Hebrew Bible as a whole:

$$\frac{P(a|b)}{P(a|HB)} = \frac{n(a \cap b)}{n(b)} \div \frac{n(a)}{n(HB)} = \frac{n(a \cap b)}{n(b)} \times \frac{n(HB)}{n(a)} = \frac{n(a \cap b) \times n(HB)}{n(a) \times n(b)} = \frac{11 \times 22,946}{419 \times 177} \approx 3.4$$

consequently lose the throne. As Saul realizes the enormity of his mistake, he admits what he did wrong: “Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice’” (1 Sam 15:24 NRSV). When Saul should have been fearing and obeying God, he instead feared and obeyed the people, thus rendering himself unfit to lead the people (cf. Ps 56:12[11]).⁵⁹

In the first chapter of Exodus, just the opposite happens. Pharaoh tells midwives to kill all newborn boys. But then in 1:17, we read, “The midwives, fearing [אֱלֹהִים] God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live” (NJPS). An interesting feature of this verse is that most people would feel enormous fear about disobeying Pharaoh’s orders. Yet, the text stresses that the midwives instead feared God. Their actions correspond to their fear of God, rather than fear of Pharaoh. Characters tend to fear whatever they see as the greatest power.⁶⁰ When God is that greatest power, people act with faithfulness like the midwives. If they instead fear human beings like Saul, they encounter ruin.⁶¹

Fear and Purity

A final point can be made about why biblical writers thought that this language of fear was so appropriate for talking about obedience to God. As is well documented, many biblical laws have a ceremonial flavor to them. They pertain to right worship. They involve what can and cannot come into the presence of God. In particular, and this point has been persuasively made by Thomas Kazen, they involve not bringing disgust-

⁵⁹ It is also interesting that Saul’s distress about David appears related to his fear of him (see 1 Sam 18:12, 29).

⁶⁰ As Michael J. Ovey puts it, “What we fear reveals a lot about where we think power truly lies” (“Off the Record: Choose Your Fears Carefully,” *Themelios* 41 [2016]: 410–12, here 412).

⁶¹ Matthew Richard Schlimm, *70 Hebrew Words Every Christian Should Know* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 137–38.

ing things into the presence of the divine king.⁶² Here is my point: when individuals have grasped God's grandeur, this type of obedience becomes second nature. Leviticus 26:2 reads, "You shall fear my sanctuary; I am the Lord" (translation mine). The Bible suggests that when people understand how great God is, they naturally have a holy and fearful reverence of God, and consequently they know not to bring what is unclean into God's most holy space.

TO FEAR OR NOT TO FEAR

We now arrive at our final question: if the Bible emphasizes the importance of fearing God, why does it so frequently tell people *not* to be afraid? Of the 309 verses containing the verb אָרָא in the Bible, approximately one-fourth of them forbid fear.⁶³

So, which one is it? Are people supposed to fear God? Are they supposed to fear human beings? Or, are they supposed to refrain from fearing either one?

The answers to these questions depend to some extent on the passage that one examines, but the following observations can be made about why the Bible commands people *not* to be afraid.

First, the Bible does attest to individuals sometimes fearing God in the wrong kind of way. In Judges 6, when Gideon sees God face-to-face,

⁶² Thomas Kazen, *Emotions in Biblical Law: A Cognitive Science Approach* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), esp. 33–36, 71–94.

⁶³ Seventy-four of the 309 verses containing the verb אָרָא ("be afraid") have the negative imperative particle אַל ("Do not") immediately preceding the verb: Gen 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19, 21; Exod 14:13; 20:20; Num 14:9; 21:34; Deut 1:21; 3:2; 20:3; 31:6; Josh 8:1; 10:8, 25; 11:6; Judg 4:18; 6:23; Ruth 3:11; 1 Sam 4:20; 12:20; 22:23; 23:17; 28:13; 2 Sam 9:7; 13:28; 1 Kgs 17:13; 2 Kgs 1:15; 6:16; 19:6; 25:24; 1 Chr 22:13; 28:20; 2 Chr 20:15, 17; 32:7; Neh 4:8[14]; Job 5:22; Ps 49:17[16]; Prov 3:25; Isa 7:4; 10:24; 35:4; 37:6; 40:9; 41:10, 13–14; 43:1, 5; 44:2; 51:7; 54:4; Jer 1:8; 10:5; 30:10; 40:9; 42:11; 46:27–28; Lam 3:57; Ezek 2:6; Dan 10:12, 19; Joel 2:21–22; Zeph 3:16; Hag 2:5; Zech 8:13, 15. Additionally, other verses convey similar ideas without the אַל ("Do not") construction, such as Deut 1:29.

he is sure he will die. His fear of being in God's presence, however, appears to be too strong. He does not have a simple holy reverence; he is literally scared to death. So, God's word in that context is, "Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die" (6:23 NRSV). In cases like this one, human emotion fails to get things right. The command not to fear offers correction.⁶⁴

Second, there are times when the Bible describes people who have suffered for their wrongdoing. Their fear is that they will suffer for it forever. In these cases, God has a comforting message. Thus, in Zephaniah, we read: "The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear [יִרָא] any harm" (3:15 NIV).⁶⁵ Exilic and post-exilic prophets dare to envision the end of punishment and consequently the end of fear.

Finally, people throughout the Bible are told not to fear other human beings, usually because God is on their side.⁶⁶ Of all the reasons that biblical characters are told not to fear, this one is the most common. Fear entails an assessment of power.⁶⁷ As people learn the fear of God, they recognize that God's power is greater than any human force,

⁶⁴ Verses where people are told not to fear the immediate presence of God include: Exod 20:20; Dan 10:12, 19; cf. Gen 15:1; 26:24; Lam 3:57. On this interpretation of Exod 20:20, cf. Fout, "What Do I Fear," 31.

⁶⁵ Verses where people are told not to fear the consequences of their sins include: 1 Sam 12:20; Isa 54:4; Zeph 3:16; Zech 8:13, 15; cf. Isa 40:9; 43:1, 5; 54:14; Jer 46:27–28.

⁶⁶ Verses where people are told not to fear other human beings include: Exod 14:13; Num 14:9; 21:34; Deut 1:21, 29; 3:2, 22; 7:18; 20:1, 3; 31:6, 8; Josh 8:1; 10:8, 25; 11:6; 2 Kgs 1:15; 6:16; 19:6; 1 Chr 22:13; 28:20; 2 Chr 20:15, 17; 32:7; Neh 4:8[14]; Ps 49:17[16]; 91:5; Prov 3:25; Isa 7:4; 8:12–13; 10:24; 35:4; 37:6; 41:10–14; 51:7, 12; Jer 1:8; 30:10; 42:11; Ezek 2:6; 3:9; Joel 2:21; Hag 2:5; cf. Gen 43:23; 50:19, 21; Judg 4:18; Ruth 3:11; 1 Sam 28:13; 2 Sam 9:7; 13:28; 2 Kgs 25:24.

⁶⁷ Drawing on the work of David Konstan, Ari Mermelstein rightly points out that fear entails an assessment of power in relationships ("Constructing Fear and Pride in the Book of Daniel: The Profile of a Second Temple Emotional Community," *JSJ* 46 (2015): 449–83, here 455–56, 459, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700631-12340109>).

including their enemies. Their world becomes rightly ordered with God over all creation, even human foes. Those who fear God have placed themselves on God's side, and consequently they therefore no longer need to fear human beings (cf. Ps 9:21[20]; 56:5[4], 12[11]).

Initially, it seems foolish to place one's trust in a party whom one fears. However, when the object of that fear is a good God, then trusting that same God actually makes a great deal of sense. Thus, a couple psalms and the book of Isaiah draw close connections between fearing God and trusting in God.⁶⁸ Jason Fout correctly observes, "Fearing God does not equate to fearfulness of things in general; quite the opposite: fearing God relativizes all other fears. To fear God and not fear others means placing all of one's hopes, trust, status, identity—indeed, one's very life—in God."⁶⁹

I would like to end on that note. Saint Francis of Assisi writes, "It is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life." In the light of the texts we've examined, we could add, "It is in fearing God that we no longer need to be afraid." By revering a good God, the world becomes rightly ordered. And the Bible insists that when things are right with God, there is nothing else to fear.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ps 40:4[3]; 115:11; Isa 50:10.

⁶⁹ Fout, "What Do I Fear," 33.

⁷⁰ Schlimm, *70 Words*, 141; note also that Walther Zimmerli writes, "Whoever fears Yahweh need have no fear, but whoever does not fear Yahweh must have fear" (*Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978], 146); cf. Mayer I. Gruber, "Fear, Anxiety and Reverence in Akkadian, Biblical Hebrew and Other North-West Semitic Languages," *VT* 40 (1990): 411–22, here 420.

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