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# Fear, Knowledge, and Love: A Study in Old Testament Piety

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ONE OF THE HALLMARKS of the religion of the Old Testament is the close integration of faith and ethics. The connection between the two was, at certain times in Israel's history, endangered. On the one hand, it was threatened by the rise of a non-ethical, paganized perversion, which was vigorously denounced by the prophets, and which the various reform movements succeeded in extirpating, at least as a serious rival to orthodox Yahwism. On the other hand, it was endangered by the rise of wisdom thinking within Israel, with its utilitarian, individualistic ethic. This latter, however, was drawn gradually into the mainstream of Israel's faith. A conspicuous example of this process is to be seen in the Israelite adaptation and rewriting of the Egyptian *Wisdom of Amen-en-opef* in the collection, "The Words of the Wise Men," contained in our present book of Proverbs (22:17-24:22), where the adapted material, no less than that of Israelite provenance, has received the clear imprint of the Yahwistic faith (e. g., 22:23; 23:11).

Clear examples of this integration of ethics and religion are to be found in the categories of fear, knowledge, and love as applied to man's response to God. In all of these the connection with ethical norms is an intimate one, though they all, in varying degrees, exhibit usage which is either independent of these norms or transcends them.

## I

"The fear of Yahweh" is as near as the Old Testament ever comes to a term for "religion." In some cases "to fear Yahweh" means little more than adherence to the cultus of Yahweh. It appears in this sense in the parting speech of Joshua, which is commonly ascribed to E (Josh. 24:14) and in P's parallel speech (Josh. 22:25). In similar fashion the term is used by the Deuteronomic editor of the books of Kings, who describes the nations settled by the Assyrians in the territory of the old northern kingdom as "fearing Yahweh" (2 Kings 17:25, 29, 32, 33). It is thus possible to speak of men "fearing" other deities, both in the case of Israel's apostasy to idolatry (e. g., 2 Kings 17:7; Judg. 6:10), and in that of the alien settlers previously mentioned (2 Kings 17:35, 37, 38).

Numinous awe is an emotion well known to the Old Testament writers, and so we find the verb *yar'e*, which is used in the previous contexts, employed in this context as well, as in the case of Jacob at Bethel (Gen.

28:17, E), or of David after Uzzah had been struck dead for touching the Ark (2 Sam. 6:9). More usual in these connections, however, is *paḥad*, whether as a verb, "to fear, tremble," or as a noun, "dread, trembling." This term is used of man's dread in the presence of the judgments of Yahweh (e.g., Isa. 2:10, 19, 21; 33:14; Ps. 14:5), or other supernatural portents, such as the vision alleged by Eliphaz (Joh. 4:14), or Yahweh's restoration of Israel after its punishment (Jer. 33:9). Thus it is even used of the emotion of the Israelites at Saul's levy of manpower for the sacred task of relieving Jabesh-Gilead (1 Sam. 11:7). In this sense Yahweh is styled the object of Isaac's fear (Gen. 31:42, 53, S).

Usually, however, the fear of Yahweh implies much more than either mere external worship of him, or numinous awe at his presence and activity. Its ethical content is clearly implied at several points in the E strand of the Pentateuch. Thus Abraham excuses his deception in the matter of Sarah's identity by stating that there is no fear of God in that place (Gen. 20:11). His willingness to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to the command of Yahweh is taken as proof that he fears God (Gen. 22:12). So Jacob explains the mitigation of his severity towards the alleged spies by his fear of God (Gen. 42:18). Similarly, the fear of Yahweh is shown by the action of Obadiah, Ahab's minister, in hiding the prophets of Yahweh from his master's persecution (1 Kings 18:3, 12), and by Hezekiah's clemency towards Micah and attention to his message (Jer. 26:19). Since the fear of God includes this scrupulous obedience to his demands, the author of the preface to the Job dialogue appropriately describes his hero as "a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 2:3; cf. 1:9). So Jeremiah can plead in vain for this quality on the part of his compatriots,

"Do you not fear me?"  
is Yahweh's oracle;  
"Do you not tremble before me?"

They do not say in their hearts,  
"Let us fear Yahweh our God." (Jer. 5:22, 24)

In the restored Israel of the future, however, he sees this quality: "I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever." (Jer. 32:39). Occasionally *paḥad* is used in a similar sense, as when Hosea describes Israel's repentance and return in days to come: "They shall come in fear to Yahweh and his goodness" (Hos. 3:5). Similarly it is stated of the nations:

They shall come trembling out of their strongholds,  
they shall turn in dread to Yahweh our God. (Mic. 7:17)

In view of this wide-spread usage it is hardly surprising that the terms "the fear of Yahweh," *yī'rath Yahweh*, and "to fear Yahweh," *yar'e eth-Yahweh*, should have found their way into the Wisdom writings. Thus they appear in the oldest collection within the book of Proverbs, e.g.:

The fear of Yahweh is a fountain of life,  
 that one may avoid the snares of death.  
 (Prov. 14:27; cf. 10:27; 14:26)

The content of the term, however, is not too clear, save in examples such as,

By the fear of Yahweh a man avoids evil,  
 (Prov. 16:6; cf. 15:16)

where an ethical tone seems to be in evidence; a short, detached two-line proverb rarely supplies enough context to clarify the term. In the prologue to the book, however, where we have the full development of sacred wisdom, not only is the ethical content clear, but also the connection with wisdom, as in the statement of the thesis of the author:

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom,  
 (Prov. 9:10; cf. 1:7)

a statement which has found its way not only into Job as a redactional note to the poem about the divine wisdom (Job 28:28), but into the Psalter as well (Ps. 111:10), slightly altered to fit the acrostich scheme of the psalm in question. In the "wisdom psalms" the fear of Yahweh is equated with a piety centred in the law in a passage such as:

The fear of Yahweh is clean,  
 and endureth for ever;  
 The judgments of Yahweh are true,  
 and righteous altogether.  
 (Ps. 19:9; cf. 112:1; 119:38)

Ben-Sira not only reproduces the statement of the author of the prologue of the book of Proverbs, but expands it at great length and varies it (Ecclus. 1:14-20). He enlarges upon the equation of wisdom, the fear of Yahweh, and the observance of the Law in passages such as these:

The man who fears Yahweh will do this,  
 and he who holds to the Law will obtain wisdom;  
 (Ecclus. 15:1)

and similarly:

All wisdom is the fear of Yahweh,  
 and in all wisdom there is the fulfilment of the Law.  
 (Ecclus. 19:20)

Significantly, he couples the fear of Yahweh with due regard for sacrificial observances (Ecclus. 7:29-31).

## II

Very similar in its use, though occurring much more sparingly, is the term, "the knowledge of God," *da'ach Elohim*, and the corresponding phrase, "to know God," *yad'a eth-ha-Elohim*, occasionally varied with the divine name Yahweh. Here too a generalized sense is possible. The older

pentateuchal tradition puts into Pharaoh's mouth the statement, "I do not know Yahweh" (Exod. 5:2, E<sup>2</sup>), in connection with his first refusal of the request to let Israel go into the wilderness to offer sacrifice. Other men and nations are spoken of as not knowing Yahweh (e.g., Jer. 10:25; Ps. 79:6)—even Cyrus, Yahweh's special instrument for the restoration of His people (Isa. 45:4). While apostate Israel, as we have noted, may be described as "fearing" other gods, it is insisted that these are "gods whom they have not known" (e.g., Deut. 11:28; 13:4; Jer. 7:9; 19:4).

More limited is the relationship implied in the phrase, to "know that I am Yahweh" or its equivalent. This occurs in contexts implying a recognition of Yahweh in his mighty acts, e.g., on the part of Pharaoh (Exod. 7:17) or of the Egyptians (14:4, 18) in connection with the signs and portents of the Exodus, but also on the part of the Israelites themselves (Exod. 16:12; Dt. 29:6). This usage agrees with that of the prophets. Ezekiel in particular makes frequent use of it, and in various ways. Israel will know that he is Yahweh when he fulfils his judgments upon Judah and Jerusalem (e.g., Ezek. 6:7; 7:4; 11:10). But no less will Yahweh reveal himself to them when he restores them after the disasters of the Exile (e.g., Ezek. 20:42, 44), and establishes his new covenant with both Israel and Judah (Ezek. 16:62; 34:27). The surrounding nations as well will know that he is Yahweh (Ezek. 36:23, 36). Very similar is the manner in which Deutero-Isaiah speaks of the portents of the coming restoration of Israel (Isa. 45:3; 49:23). Here is a manifestation of Yahweh, not only to his own people, but also to the nations, with the implication that they will be converted to the worship of Yahweh:

Then all flesh shall know  
that I am Yahweh your Saviour,  
and your Vindicator, the Mighty One of Jacob.  
(Isa. 49:26)

So the recognition of Yahweh by the other nations, and their conversion to him in days to come, is appropriately described as "knowing Yahweh" (e.g., Isa. 19:21; Ezek. 38:16), rather than merely "knowing that he is Yahweh." The relationship implied in this knowledge of God is, however, clearly more than merely one of adhering to his cultus. An ethical content is evident. So the evil lives of the sons of Eli is ascribed to their failure to know Yahweh (1 Sam. 2:12). This idea is particularly clear in the prophets. Hosea equates the knowledge of God with loyalty, *hesed*, as in the passage:

I have desired loyalty, and not sacrifice,  
and the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.  
(Hos. 6:6; cf. 4:1)

This point is characteristically echoed by Jeremiah in his statement, "Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am Yahweh who practise loyalty, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight" (Jer. 9:24). That same prophet looks back to the

righteous reign of Josiah as a conspicuous example of the knowledge of Yahweh:

He judged the cause of the poor and needy;  
then it was well.

"Is not this to know me?"  
is Yahweh's oracle.

(Jer. 22:16)

Contrariwise, national apostasy and moral indifference are the evidence that this knowledge is absent:

The ox knows his owner,  
and the ass his master's crib;  
but Israel does not know,  
my people does not understand.

(Isa. 1:3; cf. Jer. 2:8; 9:12)

Jeremiah even speaks of men refusing to know Yahweh (9:5). Accordingly, he envisages the renewed and restored Israel of the new covenant as marked by the universal knowledge of Yahweh (31:34). Characteristically, the "messianic" ruler of Israel in days to come will be one who exemplifies both the fear and the knowledge of Yahweh (Isa. 11:2).

In the above-mentioned description of the ideal king of the future the knowledge of God is coupled with wisdom as one of the gifts of Yahweh's Spirit. This link recurs in the prologue of the book of Proverbs, where the wisdom teacher promises his faithful pupil:

Then you will have insight into the fear of Yahweh,  
and you will find the knowledge of God.

(Prov. 2:5; cf. 9:10)

The knowledge of God, no less than the fear of Yahweh, is equated with righteousness and wisdom.

While it is thus abundantly clear that the knowledge of God invokes righteousness, there is some indication that it goes beyond the merely ethical dimension. Thus Balaam is said to describe himself as

him who hears the words of God,  
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,  
who sees the vision of Shaddai,

(Num. 24:16)

which, in the context, apparently refers to prophetic insight. This, however, is hardly a normal case. More appropriate for our purposes is the description of the devotee of Yahweh as one who "knows his name" (Ps. 9:11; 91:14). It would appear that some special personal relationship is here implied. Here we should note that while men are described as "fearing" other deities, nowhere are they said to know them, since, at least from the standpoint of Israel's developed monotheism, a personal relationship with any deity other than Yahweh would be *ex hypothesi* impossible. Similarly, it is stated of Yahweh's relation to Israel:

You only have I known  
of all the families of the earth.

(Amos 3:2)

Correspondingly, the epilogue to Deuteronomy states that Yahweh knew Moses face to face (Dt. 34:10). So, in a much later writing it is stated concerning the righteous man that

He professes to have knowledge of God,  
and calls himself a child of the Lord. (Wisd. 2:13)

Without prejudice to the ethical content of the knowledge of God, we may well recognize mystical overtones therein, certainly hinted at in some of the occurrences of the term and nowhere excluded.

### III

The intensely personal character of man's communion with God is suitably stated in terms of love. Thus the Old Testament speaks both of God's love towards man and of man's love towards God. The love of God displayed towards man is, of course, primary. Thus Yahweh's election of Israel is described as an act of love on his part: "It is because Yahweh loves you and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand" (Deut. 7:8; cf. 23:5; 33:4). Similarly Hosea states on Yahweh's behalf:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hos. 11:1)

with this may be compared Jeremiah's statement:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my loyalty to you. (Jer. 31:3)

In Deutero-Isaiah Yahweh's love towards Israel appears as the motive for his redemption of his people from their exile:

Because you are precious in my eyes,  
and honoured, and I love you,  
I give men in return for you,  
peoples in exchange for your life. (Isa. 43:4)

In similar vein it is stated in Trito-Isaiah:

In his love and in his pity he vindicated them;  
He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.  
(Isa. 63:9)

So Malachi can begin his appeal to Israel in his day with a reminder that God's love is still operative, and that it has been displayed in the recent overthrow of the Edomites (Mal. 1:2f).

Accordingly, man's response to God's love is one of love towards him. So Deuteronomy insists on this as man's first duty: "You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). Frequently throughout the book this demand is

reiterated, and with numerous variations. Constantly it is stressed that this love consists in obedience: "You shall therefore love Yahweh your God, and keep his charge, his statutes, his ordinances, and his commandments always" (Deut. 11:1; cf. 10:12; 11:13, 22; 19:19; 30:6, 16, 20). Further, Israel is warned that its love towards Yahweh is subject to testing by him by the rise of false prophets (Deut. 13:3). The same stress is evident in the various deuteronomic retouchings in the narrative books (e.g., Josh. 22:5; 23:11; Judg. 5:31). In both expansions of the "Ethical Decalogue" the continuance of Yahweh's favour is asserted towards those who show their love towards him by faithful obedience to his commandments (Exod. 20:6; Deut. 5:10).

This stress is reflected in the Psalter. Here it is not only stated that the godly are the objects of God's love (Ps. 146:8); the votary in his thanksgiving to Yahweh for deliverance from mortal peril expresses himself thus:

I love Yahweh,  
because he hath heard the voice of my prayer.  
(Ps. 116:1; cf. 18:1.)

The godly are exhorted:

O love Yahweh, all ye his saints. (Ps. 31:24)

The oracle speaks of the petitioner for asylum:

Because he hath set his love upon me, I will deliver him.  
(Ps. 91:14)

Accordingly, Yahweh's devotees are regularly described as "those who love his name" (Ps. 5:12; 69:36; 119:132).

Men may thus be described as God's friends, those who love him (cf. Ps. 145:20), a title bestowed on Abraham in particular by Deutero-Isaiah, as he speaks on Yahweh's behalf to

the seed of Abraham, my friend. (Isa. 41:8)

In the later writings, however, this is changed. The godly man is now spoken of as the lover of God's law, or of wisdom, rather than of God himself. This is, of course, in keeping with the marked emphasis on the divine transcendence, and a tendency to describe man's communion with God in less direct and immediate terms. So Psalm 119 abounds in expressions of the devout man's love for the Torah (e.g., vv. 47, 48, 97, 113, 119). As we would expect, in the Wisdom literature the object of the love of the godly man is Wisdom herself. The authors do not hesitate to describe that love in clearly nuptial terms, as in the prologue of Proverbs:

The beginning of wisdom is this:  
Get wisdom,  
and, whatever you get, get insight.  
Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;  
she will honour you if you embrace her. (Prov. 4:7f)

and similarly, in the Wisdom of Solomon:

I loved her and sought her from my youth,  
and I desired to take her for my bride,  
and I became enamoured of her beauty. (Wisd. 8:2)

In the same manner the latter writer exhorts rulers to love righteousness (Wisd. 1:1). There is, on the other hand, no difficulty in speaking of men as the objects of God's love (e.g., Wisd. 7:28), as this does not affect the divine transcendence.

#### IV

To sum up: throughout the Old Testament the emphasis is on a personal relationship between God and man, an encounter which is always a personal one, and which demands of men a personal response. If at any time there was a tendency to regard this response as a conformity to an impersonal divinely enjoined righteousness, this tendency was hardly in accordance with the Scriptures themselves. To fear, to know, to love God—these are not the response of a mechanical legalism.