Justifying the Fear of the LORD By Ted Hildebrandt (ETS Nov. 2010, Atlanta) Google: Ted Hildebrandt, Go to the faculty.gordon.edu site, Proverbs

Introduction

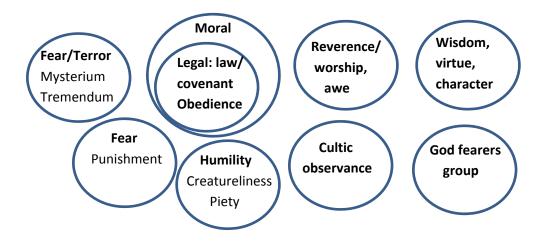
The "fear of the LORD/God" has been called the motto, square one and the primary starting point of wisdom literature. In this paper, the biblical data will be examined afresh utilizing Cognitive Linguistics, which holds great potential for seeing how the diverse semantic meanings of this phrase are connected. The historic and prophetic narratives, with their fuller descriptions of the fear of God, will be explored before moving to the more laconic statements in the wisdom literature.

Many writers have proffered definitions for the "fear of the LORD/God." Terrien gives an expansive description of the "fear of God" as "An emotional experience of a complex nature which is connected with the perception or the awareness of the holy... which produces the concomitant reactions of repulsion, attraction, fascination, awe, reverence, love, trust, faith, worship, and adoration" (Terrien, IDB, 2:256).

Here is a comparison that will help introduce one salient point in the discussion of the "fear of the LORD/God" syntagm. Compare the phrases "fear of God" and "wrath of God" (Rom. 1:18). The "wrath of God" is the wrath that God experiences. But is that analogous to the "fear of God"? Is it "God's fear"--the fear that God experiences? Why does such a notion not work? Is it just that the "wrath of God" a subjective genitive--God's wrath, while the "fear of God" is an objective genitive--fear one has toward God? Why is there an automatic assumption of a subjective genitive with the "wrath of God" but a palpable rejection of a subjective genitive for the "fear of God"? Fear has embedded in it the perceived inability to control and the helplessness to defend oneself from harm which seem to be incommensurate with our understanding of God. One who is powerful, such as a king, is feared by one who is not.

One may be perplexed in studying the "fear of the LORD/God" because of the diversity of meanings, collocates and contexts in which "the fear of God" occurs. The following are some of the varied polysemic semantic areas of meaning encompassed by

the syntagm "the fear of the LORD/God."



The Cognitive Nature of Metonymy

The term "metonymy" is often thought of as merely a figure of speech, a rhetorical decoration or a literary trope for "one name used in place of another." So Balaam, in his fourth oracle, predicts that "a scepter will rise out of Jacob" (Num. 24:17). Here "scepter" is a metonymic vehicle for the target meaning "king" and "Jacob" is a metonymic vehicle for the target meaning "the nation of Israel."

Cognitive linguists, however, do not focus on the term "metonymy" as a figure of speech, but, rather, as a way of thinking--a conceptual phenomenon and a cognitive process. Roman Jacobson, in an article in *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast*, describes metonymy as one of two poles . Metaphor is a pole on one end as a way of thinking that features paradigmatic and substitution mappings across mental categories based on similarity. Metonymy is at the other pole based on contiguity. Jacobson then classifies literature based on its embrace of metaphor (e.g. Psalms, "the Lord is my shepherd") or metonymy (e.g. Proverbs, "the mouth of the wicked") (Dirven, 42-43). Barcelona, in his book *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads*, charts metaphor as "imagistic reasoning" and "similarity" based while metonymy is a "referential shift" featuring "contiguity" (Barcelona, 65). John Taylor, in his text on *Cognitive Grammar*, notes that metonymy "turns out to be one of the most fundamental processes of meaning extension, more basic, perhaps, even than metaphor" (124).

Bartsch describes the ways it actually may extend meaning: "metonymy is based on perspective change and contiguity relationships, such as relationships of part-whole, cause-effect, means-end, action-result, instrument-action" (Dirven, 55).

Polysemy is often present in metonymy. Dirven gives four examples utilizing "school" as a polysemic metonymy: (1) "They will have to wait until school is over to get a vacation" (school=school year); (2) "He should not stay away from school any longer or he'll fail" (school=daily classroom instruction); (3) "Robin was told to give the report to the school" (school=teaching staff); and (4) "The school would give no raises this year" (school=executive administration) (94). Radden and Kövecses cite "Go to bed" with "bed" as a polysemic metonymy for the diverse targets of sleep, sex or sickness (22). Thus, metonymy may play a critical role in meaning extension of a term or syntagm.

There are different cognitive processes involved in metonymistic ways of thinking. The following is a sample of schemas illustrated in Radden and Kövecses (29-43). Generally they use all capitals to represent cognitive concepts as opposed to specific linguistic expression of those concepts.

PART/WHOLE: "Nice set of wheels there" ["wheels" for "car"] CATEGORY FOR MEMBER: "the pill" [for "birth control pill"] MEMBER FOR A CATEGORY: "aspirin" [for "any pain-relieving tablet"] GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC: "Big Boys don't cry" [used in a specific situation] SPECIFIC FOR GENERIC: "I did some xeroxing" [for "copying"] AGENT FOR ACTION: "to author a book" [for "writing" a book] RESULT FOR ACTION: "to landscape a garden" [for raking, planting, etc.] INSTRUMENT FOR AGENT: "the pen wrote" [for the writer] EFFECT FOR CAUSE: "John has a long face" [for "sadness"] PRODUCER FOR PRODUCT: The Harley sounded great [for motorcycle] With that background on metonymy, we will explore the diverse meanings of the phrase "fear of the LORD/God" and how metonymy may help us understand the connection of the various semantic fields over which this syntagm ranges.

Sacred Fear of God

The "fear of the LORD/God" has been connected with Rudolph Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*, and can be labeled "sacred fear." Such "sacred fear" is present in numerous or, perhaps better, numinous texts. Moses sought to hide his face, afraid to look at God, in the theophany of the burning bush (Ex. 3:6, cf. Acts 7:32). Exodus 20:18-20 provides another illustration: "Then all the people observed the thunderings and lightnings, and the sound of the ram's horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. So they said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak with us or we will die.'" Waltke has well observed that this *mysterium tremendum* aspect in Exodus 20:19 is coupled with the moral dimension in verse 20 (Waltke, 22). "Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, for God has come to prove you, that his fear may be upon you so that you do not sin" (20:20; cf. Ex. 34:10; Isa 8:12-13).

This type of awesome fear is a response not just to his theophanic appearances and mighty deeds in history but also to the holiness and incomparability of his being. When Isaiah 41:23 is arguing for the incomparability of God and the impotence of pagan gods of wood and stone he taunts them, "Predict the things that are to come in the future, that we may prove that you are gods. Yes, do good, or do evil, so that we may be frightened (שָׁהָּעָה): be afraid) and be in awe (בָּאָהָעָה).

Jeremiah 10:7 highlights the incomparability aspect of the fear of God and ties it to God's kingship: "Who should not fear (יָרָאָר) you, O King of the nations? This is what you deserve. For among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you." This connection of sacred fear with the divine king also occurs in Psalm 47:2-3 and 2:11-12. Proverbs 24:21-22 also couples fearing as an appropriate response to both God and the king.

Terror-of-Punishment Fear of God

Moving on from "sacred fear," resulting from theophanic appearances or divine incomparability, the **fear of punishment** type of "fear of the LORD/God" is referred to in 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love casts out fear, because fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been made perfect in love." This is an EFFECT TO CAUSE way of thinking with the EFFECT "fear" pointing back to the CAUSE "potential punishment." This type of fear is evinced in the hiding of Adam and Eve after their sin in the garden. Psalm 90 also highlights this fear of punishment in verse 7 and following: "We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. . . For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you."

Other Types of Fear of the LORD/God

Becker in his classic monograph *Gottesfrucht im Alten Testament* isolates three other aspects of meaning, as pointed out by Blocher: **moral** (the fear of God is upright behavior); **cultic** (the fear of God is the proper form of worship); and **legal** (the fear of God is the observance of the law). There seems to be a general consensus that these are all valid categories (Blocher, 7), although some see legal and cultic as overlapping.

Cultic Fear of God: Cultic Observance

This writer suggests that the distinction of **cultic fear** should be maintained. Such a difference is useful in understanding certain passages, such as in 2 Kings 17:25-40. The historical context was that the king of Assyria was resettling Samaria with a new foreign population after the Northern Kingdom had been deported. They did not "fear the LORD" so the Lord sent lions who killed some of their people. Thus one of the priests who had been exiled from Samaria was brought back to live in Bethel and to teach them **how to** "worship" or more literally "fear the LORD". Clearly the repeated phrase "worship" [lit. "fear"] here refers to cultic observance in contrast to a moral or covenantal aspect. The new inhabitants "would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices. Even while these people were worshiping the LORD ["fearing the LORD"], they were serving their idols" (2 Kgs. 17:41). Certainly their idolatry was in disobedience to the exclusive commands of the law; nevertheless, the text acknowledges that they were still "fearing the LORD" in the sense of offering cultic observances via sacrifices to him. The distinction between legal and cultic fear is useful in this situation.

Fear as Respect

Leviticus 19:30 does not refer to emotional "fear" but more cultic reverence directed at the sanctuary itself. One does not "fear" the sanctuary but one is to respect and reverence it. Sometimes "fear" is used simply for showing respect with no feeling of emotive "fear," such as in the admonition to "fear"/respect one's parents or rising in the presence of the aged (Lev. 19:3, 32, NRSV). Becker and others, however, see the root notion of "fear" bleeding over into every use of the phrase. This writer suggests that sometimes it is metonymistically conventionalized and that the root notion fades away into the background as is the case in Leviticus 19. This type of "respect" fear is not a momentary situationally-based emotional response, but something that can be taught (Ps. 34:12) and endures (Ps. 19:9).

Legal/Covenantal Fear of God

The legal aspect can be seen in Deuteronomy 6:1-2. "Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the regulations that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, ... so that you, your children and your grandchildren may fear the LORD your God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, . . . and that your life may be long." Notice the pedagogical $\exists d z$ context as well as the linking of the fear of the LORD to a series of legal terms such as "the commandment, the statutes and the regulations." Observe also the reward of long life as seen also in Deuteronomy 6:24, reminding one that the benefits of fearing God mentioned in the Torah are similar to what is described in proverbial wisdom literature.

Broad Moral Fear of God

Sometimes there is one who is acting in a way that is more broadly **moral**, even

though the person is outside the covenantal or legal constraints of Israel; yet this one is still considered to be demonstrating the fear of God. The Akedah, in the Abraham narrative, climaxes with God's pronouncement: "Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen. 22:12). Unconditional obedience is designated by the accolade of God's own coming to know that indeed Abraham does "fear God." Both the Egyptian mid-wives and Joseph, as an Egyptian ruler, are outside the covenant context yet are said to "fear the LORD" in this broader moral sense (Exod. 1:17, 20; Gen 42:18).

Simple Piety

Sometimes the "fear of God" is simply used as a metonymy for one's piety. This is seen in the case of Obadiah in 1 Kings 18:3 (NRSV), "Ahab summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of his palace. (Now Obadiah revered [;;;] the LORD greatly...)." Clearly Obadiah is being identified as a devout or pious believer by the use of the term "fear."

Wisdom Fear of God: Virtue

In wisdom literature Job is the prototypical example of one who fears God. Of Job it is said, "this man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1). Dr. Longman in his article on the "Fear of God" has highlighted the connection of the "fear of the LORD" with virtue (205). After God's affirmation, the satan poses the key question of the book: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" It is the motive underlying this virtue that is questioned. The fear of God has brought Job benefits (family, wealth, esteem). If these extrinsic motivations were removed would Job forsake the fear of God? In short, was it Job's prosperity that motivated his fear of God or was his fear independent of any external inducements?

Job 28:28 has been abandoned by some as a later addition because the name "Adonai" in the "fear of the Lord" is found only here in the entire book. The chapter has asked, "But where can wisdom be found?" (28:12, 20). Indeed it is beyond, and hidden from, humanity, but the poem abruptly shifts to God's revelation or instruction in this

verse--not as a pious addition, but as an instructional conclusion (cf. Eccles. 12:13; Ps. 111:10). "And he (God) said to man, 'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding." The antithetic parallelism juxtaposes the "fear of the Lord" and shunning evil, thus casting it in its moral domain, while at the same time linking it to wisdom--not unlike Proverbs 8:13.

In Proverbs, Fox notes there are three ways of understanding the "fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge": (1) first in time; (2) principle, essence, foundation; and (3) the best part in quality and importance. He adopts the first following Ibn Ezra "it [fear of the LORD] is the first thing to know, and afterwards one may learn and know everything else" (Fox, 67-68). This writer would follow the second with the NLT which translates the motto: "Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Prov. 1:7). Note here again the "fear of the LORD" is paralleled with "knowledge/wisdom" (cf. 9:10).

Many have noted that structurally this syntagm provides an inclusio that opens and closes not only the instructional unit of Proverbs 1-9 (1:7; 9:10), but the whole book, as the final poem closes with one who "fears the LORD" in the poem of the Virtuous Woman (Prov. 31:30). Fox maintains that it is unintentional (Fox, 69), while this writer attributes intentionality to such literary shaping because of the such low frequency of the phrase (20x in Proverbs) and the occurrence in such highly significant places (beginning/end). Proverbs 2:5 puts "the fear of the LORD" in the context of the search for wisdom and that this wisdom is granted as a gift from God. So the phrase "fear of the LORD" can be seen as a metonymistic stand-in for "wisdom" rather than as a synonym. In Proverbs the moral element is high. For example Proverbs 8:13 states: "To fear the LORD is to hate evil, I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech." To fear the LORD here means to have the same evaluation of these vices as God does. Longman carefully observes in Proverbs 3:7 that the contrast is made between being "wise in one's own eyes," and fearing the LORD. He concludes, "Thus it is appropriate to think that proper fear of Yahweh leads to humility and avoidance of pride" (cf. 15:33)(202).

As Madame Wisdom has long life in her right hand, so "the fear of the LORD" lengthens one's life (Prov. 10:27; 19:23). The benefits of wisdom parallel the benefits of the "fear of the LORD." Proverbs 22:4 links humility and the "fear of the LORD," which bring, "wealth and honor and life" which are the exact same benefits as wisdom (Prov. 8:18, 21; 3:16).

It is preferable to look at the relationship between wisdom and the "fear of the LORD" as metonymistic rather than as overlapping synonyms. This metonymistic substitution also can be seen in echoing proverbs (vid Snell's, *Twice Told Proverbs*). Compare Proverbs 13:14, "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning one from the snares of death," with Proverbs 14:27 "The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning one from the snares of death." An interesting twist is seen in Proverbs 29:25: "The fear of people becomes a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is secure." The "fear of people" is contrasted not with "the fear of the LORD," which would have seemed natural, but rather with "trust" in the LORD. Again there may be a metonymistic connection of "fear" and "trust."

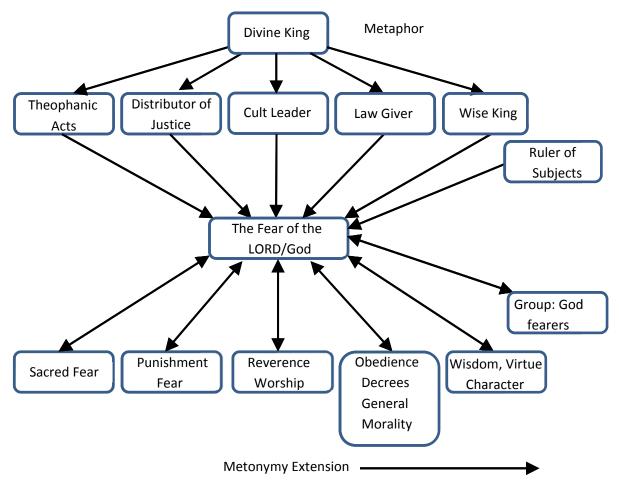
As "righteous" is the natural antithetic parallel to "wicked," so "the fear of the LORD" substitutes as a stand-in, in contrast to the "wicked" (Prov. 10:27). Returning to the metaphor/metonymy poles notice in Proverbs 14:2, "He whose walk is upright fears the LORD, but he whose ways are devious despises him." The metaphorical concept LIFE IS A JOURNEY ("walk") is coupled with the metonymy "fears the LORD" as one who shows respect to the LORD as opposed to the one who despises him. Notice the proverb pairs of two "better-than" sayings in Proverbs 15:16/17: "Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil. Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred." The external parallelism compares the "fear of the LORD" with "love," a link seen also in Deuteronomy 10:12. Again the "fear of the LORD" appears to be a substitute where "righteousness" is actually used in the same type of semantic frame in Proverbs 16:8, "Better a little with righteousness."

There is in Proverbs a strong connection of ACT→ CONSEQUENCE as is reflected in Samuel L. Adam's recent book, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence*

in Second Temple Instructions. The underlying structure of many Proverbs, however, is more accurately described in the connection of CHARACTER \rightarrow CONSEQUENCE. A cursory reading of Proverbs may give the appearance of an *opus operatum*--a kind of plug-in-an-act and the proverb will pop-out-the-consequence. For example, "diligent hands bring wealth" (10:4). Yet Proverbs 16:1-4, and 9 conditions the proverbial eudaemonism with the divine hand. So "A person plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps." God is the one who makes the connection between character and consequence--between act and destiny (cf. Prov. 21:30, 31). Therefore, as the sovereign, he should be feared. This is at the core of biblical wisdom and to be assumed as underlying and conditioning the movement of every proverbial statement.

Conclusion

A synthesis or model may be made of a metaphorical way of understanding the whole complex of meanings of "the fear of the LORD/God" via the metaphor of God as king with the response of "fear" and its diverse sphere of usages connected by contiguous metonymistic extension.



This model is helpful in understanding the polysemic character of the "fear of the LORD/God" in Scripture. The top begins with the metaphor of God as king, which is often associated with the "fear" factor. The different roles of the king call for a "fear of the LORD/God" response. Most literally that fear is emotive as in the cases of theophanic acts [produces] \rightarrow sacred fear or distributor of justice \rightarrow fear of punishment. The metonymy at the base extends the meaning over into the realms of cult leader \rightarrow reverence/performance, law giver \rightarrow obedience, wise king \rightarrow virtue and ruler of subjects \rightarrow God fearers as a group. This approach ties the various polysemic meanings together into a coherent whole.

Finally, Tozer's caution that it is not enough to simply define a theological concept but one must know its meaning in life experience must be acknowledged. It is to that end we must commit ourselves: integrating the "fear of the LORD" in all of its diversity into every aspect of our existence responding in "fear" to the rule of the Divine

King. That would indeed be our wisdom.

I would like to thank my son Elliott who is a Marine fighting this day in

Afghanistan. God has used him to teach me the fear of the LORD in ways beyond what I could ever have imagined.

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