

Proverbs: The Fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10)

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Keywords

Proverbs, Fear of the Lord, Idiom, Wisdom, Obedient Trust, Multivalency, Hebrew Poetry, Metaphor, Covenant, Knut Heim

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Knut Heim explores the foundational biblical maxim "the fear of the Lord" found in Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10. Dr. Heim demonstrates that "fear of the Lord" functions as an idiom signifying obedient trust and a personal relationship with God rather than literal terror or anxious dread. By examining the Sinai covenant in Exodus 20, the linguistic multivalency of the Hebrew word *reshit*, and the creative nature of Hebrew poetry, Heim argues that the phrase reflects a deliberate poetic ambiguity combining beginning, chief feature, and essence. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how theological wisdom and practical morality are inextricably linked, showing that genuine reverence for God transforms human character and daily conduct.

Outline

I. Introduction and Contextual Setting (Proverbs 1:7)

- A. Connection to Lecture 2
 - 1. Recaps opening verses of Proverbs 1 (verses 1–6)
 - 2. Establishes Proverbs 1:7 as the quintessential summary of wisdom and faith
- B. Core Aims of Lecture 3
 - 1. Explore the semantic meaning of the phrase "fear of the Lord" using key biblical texts
 - 2. Apply this theological understanding to the intellectual study of Proverbs
- C. Overview of Verse Structure (Proverbs 1:7)
 - 1. Meaning of "fear of the Lord"
 - 2. Meaning of the word translated "beginning" (*reshit*)
 - 3. Contrast presented in the second half of the verse ("fools despise wisdom and instruction")

II. Reinterpreting "Fear of the Lord" as an Idiom

- A. Critique of the Literal Reading
 - 1. Literal interpretation implies being scared or terrified of God
 - 2. Rejects the imagery of God as a harsh 1930s-style schoolmaster using corporal punishment
- B. Definition and Function of an Idiom

1. Idiom defined: A word combination whose unified meaning differs from the sum of its individual words
2. Modern example: "Catch my drift" (understanding deeper significance, unrelated to physical drifting)
3. Theological definition of "fear of the Lord": Obedient trust in God
 - a. Based on a positive, personal relationship rather than anxious dread
 - b. Motivates voluntary, trust-inspired obedience

C. Biblical Grounding: Exodus 20 (The Sinai Covenant)

1. Context of God's self-revelation and theophany at Mount Sinai
2. Israel's initial reaction of dread and request for Moses to act as intermediary
3. Moses' clarifying declaration (Exodus 20:20): "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you, so that you do not sin"
 - a. Direct contrast between being scared ("do not be afraid") and having covenantal reverence ("fear of him")
 - b. Fear of the Lord as a call to voluntary obedience stemming from gratitude for liberation

D. Modern Idiomatic Parallel

1. Description of exemplary believers as "God-fearing" men or women
2. Reflects deep devotion, exemplary lifestyle, generosity, and neighborly care rather than living in fear

III. Exegesis of "Beginning" (Reshit) in Proverbs 1:7

A. Linguistic Background of Reshit Hokhmah

1. Derived from the Hebrew root rosh, meaning "head"
2. Literal rendering: "The fear of the Lord is the head of wisdom"
3. Metaphorical construction requiring careful hermeneutics

B. Bruce Waltke's Threefold Interpretation of Reshit

1. Temporally: First thing
2. Qualitatively: Chief thing
3. Philosophically: Principal thing or essence

C. Standard Scholarly Consensus (Bruce Waltke's View)

1. Resolves ambiguity in Proverbs 1:7 by appealing to Proverbs 9:10
2. Proverbs 9:10 uses tehillah, an unambiguous Hebrew word clearly meaning "beginning"
3. Employs Rabbi Hillel's rule: Interpreting ambiguous passages via unambiguous parallel texts
4. Concludes that "beginning" (temporally first) is the primary meaning

IV. Dr. Heim's Position: Deliberate Poetic Ambiguity and Multivalency

A. The Poetic Nature of Proverbs

1. Belongs to biblical poetic literature alongside Job, Psalms, and Song of Songs

2. Authored with creative artistry; inspired by the Holy Spirit as the ultimate creative entity
3. Luis Alonso Schökel's principle: "What has been written with imagination must be read with imagination"

B. Defense of Authorial Intent

1. Rejects the view that *reshit* in Proverbs 1:7 was an authorial mistake or shortcoming needing correction by Proverbs 9:10
2. Asserts deliberate multivalency: The author chose *reshit* specifically to convey multiple dimensions at once

C. Synthesis of Meaning

1. The fear of the Lord is simultaneously the starting point (beginning), the most important feature (chief thing), and the core nature (essence) of wisdom

V. Theological and Practical Implications for Studying Proverbs

A. Refuting the "Secular Wisdom" Hypothesis

1. Rejects 20th-century scholarly claims (McKane, Crenshaw) that Proverbs is secular due to absence of temple/covenant terminology
2. Highlights that ~10% of verses (~91 verses) explicitly or implicitly reference God

B. Reciprocal Relationship Between Wisdom and Reverence

1. Proverbs 1:7: Fear of the Lord enables the acquisition of wisdom
2. Proverbs 2:1–5: The diligent study of wisdom leads to understanding the fear of the Lord and finding knowledge of God

C. Equating Reverence with Wisdom Instruction

1. Proverbs 15:33: "The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor"
2. Studying wisdom texts is itself an act of living as a God-fearing person

D. Summary Conclusion

1. Biblical wisdom is deeply theological, relational, and practical
2. True knowledge transforms character, lifestyle, decision-making, and contribution to the common good