

## Overview of the Phrase 'Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom'

- Common theme in ANE writings and belief systems - many deities expected to rule by fear, with so many deities ascribed to weather systems this is no surprising (re Exodus story)
- Yahweh was also referred to in this way, as striking fear into the hearts of enemies
- However, overwhelmingly, the most common usage is with reference to wisdom
- Exclusively an OT concept, no reference in the gospels, only 1 or 2 in the letters
- It is a fundamental principle that governs the whole of life in wisdom literature
- The 'fear of the Lord' is an acknowledgment that Yahweh governs all aspects of life.
- It is heavily linked to creation theology, recognising that Yahweh is the creator of all and as such knows how to 'order' creation so it works best (wisdom)
- It could be called religious piety - that is a strong and respectful belief in Yahweh
- Can be divided into three distinct strands in OT
  - Royal and Scribal
  - Subversive
  - Prophetic

### Royal and Scribal - Proverbs 1 and Psalm 34

#### Proverbs 1

- 'Fear of the Lord' is a stance the believer takes before Yahweh to confess Yahweh as the creator and sustainer of all life and the source and provider of all wisdom. Yahweh is the beginning or best of wisdom/knowledge.
- The entire enterprise of living life begins with that acknowledgment - otherwise you are a fool
  - contrast in proverbs is always between the wise and the fool
  - the fool is the one who doubts the Yahweh, and does not fear
  - the wise person is the one who accepts the wisdom of Yahweh as a gift in order that they may live a life that is acceptable and right to Yahweh
- The 'fear of the Lord' therefore leads necessarily to a moral framework for life
- But before one can understand this framework they must have religious conviction and reverence in place otherwise possession of wisdom will never occur.
- For the composer of these pieces faith & reason, confession & experience, and analysis & reverence are no polar opposites but rather parts of the whole pursuit of wisdom that is found in Yahweh.

#### Psalm 34

- The wisdom of the Proverb scribes also crosses over into the Royal Courts. In Psalm 34 we find the outworking of a life spent in 'fear of the Lord'
  - you will be rescued from all fears (v 4)

- you will be made radiant (v5)
- saved from every trouble (v6)
- lack no good thing (v10)
- saved when you are crushed in Spirit (v18)
- delivered from any affliction (v19)
- not harmed physically (v20)
- not condemned but redeemed (v22)
- All rather grand claims made for those who 'fear the Lord'
- We must remember in reading this that it was the King who represented Yahweh, and mediated Yahweh's voice, and that it was the King who made the laws and regulations, and who decided who would live and die.
- So when this Psalm makes all these claims, they are made on behalf of and for the King as well
- They can be seen as Royal Propaganda - fear me, keep my rules and I will look after you is the hidden subtext.
- These claims that life will be ok if you follow the commandments, and love you neighbour are all put to the test in Ecclesiastics, who unmasks them for what they really are.

### **Subversive Fear - Yahweh as other**

Ecc and Job

- Ecc 4.12-16 and 8.12-14
- Ecc subverts the ideology of wisdom as presented in the Monarchy and Priesthood
- Arguing that even if you do follow Yahweh's ways this is no guarantee of a good life
- The wicked prosper and the righteous die young and poor (note there is no concept of the afterlife in this writing)
- The propaganda of the King is unmasked for what it is, power seeking
- Job also picks up on this idea and shows that one should fear the Lord because Yahweh is wholly other, God is God and is comparable and accountable to no-one, subject to no one's rules or even the rules that Yahweh seemingly sets up
- The 'fear of the Lord' guarantees nothing

Jeremiah and the prophetic critique

- Jeremiah critiques the Royal concept of 'Fear of the Lord' but from the perspective of justice, arguing that to fear God one must live a life that is just and fair as God is
- He reminds the Israelites of their story, arguing that it was the 'fear of the Lord' that led them into the promised land and their loss of it has caused their exile
- They must rediscover a healthy fear in order to encounter God again
- He looks back to the time when the Judges were appointed in Israel to oversee the tribes and bring order to them (2 Chronicles 19.5-11)

- They were appointed by choice, by the people, to serve the people - but like the Kings after them they soon became selfish and served their own needs
- He predicts that out of this situation comes one who will come who will 'fear the Lord' and restore justice to the Israel, and bring back the presence of Yahweh - the messiah

### **New Testament Perspectives**

- No references, in Gospels, only two in letters
- Jesus never spoke about 'fear of the Lord'
- Acts 9 refers to it with reference to the new christian communities growing, 'in the fear of the Lord and community of the Holy Spirit.'
- The confession of living in the 'fear of the Lord' is now replaced with 'Christ is Lord', the OT idea filtered through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- The references in the NT could both see Lord as Jesus rather than Yahweh which brings a very different reading to the phrase
- Reverence, and acknowledgment of Christ now means the the locus of wisdom lies in the life of Christ rather than the writings of the scribes or the court of the King.
- The ongoing wisdom for life comes from the community of believers guided by the Spirit rather than by a ruler or priest
- There still needs to be a healthy fear of God, and Christ, as the Christ we see in the gospels presents a God who sides with the poor, with those who know little and are worthless. This God is unpredictable, neither wholly other nor a guarantor of our livelihoods

### **Considerations**

- Leadership in church can produce a 'fear of the Lord' akin to that under the monarchy in Israel, where in effect the leaders become the sole spokespersons for God
- This produces an unhealthy fear of God as it is too tied to human institutions and individual ideologies
- If we return to some of the original ideas behind this phrase:-
  - faith & reason
  - confession & experience
  - analysis & reverence

we can see that these different models each take away one of the binaries to leave a singular opinion with no room for questioning or personal experience

- In order to have a healthy 'fear of the Lord', or healthy confession of 'Christ as Lord' we need to hold all these things together, with both God as wholly other, distant, uncontrollable and God as wholly present, gracious, refreshing - both as a communities and as individuals

## Questions

- What experience of 'fear' in Church have you had - how has it affected you and your perception of God?
- What can we learn from the various OT readings of 'fear of the Lord'?
- Are we too secular in our thinking about the world and how it operates?
- How can we bring the OT and NT perspectives together?
- How can we increase the sense of proper 'fear of the Lord' in moot? And in our personal lives?

## Suggested Reading

Perdue, LG, *Proverbs (IBC Series)*, John Knox Press 2000

\_\_\_\_\_, *Wisdom and Creation: Theology of Wisdom Literature*, Abingdon Press 1993

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Sheriffs, D, *Friendship of the Lord*, Paternoster Press, 1996

von Rad, G, *Old Testament Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press 2001

\_\_\_\_\_, *Wisdom in Israel*, SCM Press 1972

Walther, E, *Theology of the Old Testament Vol 1+2*, Westminster John Knox Press 1999