

THE CONCEPT OF THE “FEAR OF GOD” IN THE WISDOM LITERATURE: IMPLICATION FOR REFORMATION OF SOCIETY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

JOSEPH GYANVI-BLAY¹

ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is basically, on the concept of the fear of God in the wisdom literature. A cursory look reveals it is a unifying factor a principle of wisdom and steps or curriculum to wisdom. Content analysis of the wisdom literature is done, and it revealed that the fear of God is to hate evil or turn away from evil and lead a blameless life. Some of the benefits are long life, security, confidence and hope during the time of crisis. In literature the concept is arranged first in Proverbs as the foundation of wisdom, embodiment of wisdom in Job and conclusion of life in *Qoheleth*. The pedagogical steps of acquiring wisdom through the fear of God will equip every Ghanaian learner with the matured conscience of knowing what is right and being delighted to do it.

Key Words: Fear of God, wisdom, hate evil, reformation, society, national development

INTRODUCTION

In my early secondary days, at Nkroful Agriculture Secondary School, one of my father’s last words to me the night before my departure from home the next day, was the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” stated in Proverbs 9:10. He kept on hammering this word until it created in me a philosophy that my ability to excel in academics in the school was dependent on the attitude of the “fear of the Lord”. In view of this when I began studying the wisdom literature in Old Testament studies, that word sparked in me the desire to investigate the concept critically to find out what means in the Hebrew Bible in general and the wisdom literature.

I have observed over the years that many people’s attitudes towards one another and work do not depict the fear of God as I understood it in my early days hence I would take the opportunity to explain the concept in detail, what it means in the Hebrew Bible in general, the types and instances of the fear of God existing in the above biblical text and then delve into the wisdom literature itself.

Ettienne Ellis, reviewing Rudolf Otto’s article “*Das Heilige*”, starts by explaining religion as a phenomenon which deals with both rational² and non-rational issues including feelings.³ He elaborates further by saying that religion includes feelings that is expressed by devotees or adherents which emanates from the holy⁴. This holy or sacred or deity, according to Ellis, can “produce awfulness and overpoweringness in the minds” of the devotees⁵. This awfulness in a devotee grows to become fear which draws the devotee towards the deity, and it is this experience that underlies religion. This fear is referred to by Ellis, as numinous experience which consists of three components in Latin namely *mysterium* (blank wonder), *tremendum* (awfulness, terror, overpoweringness) *et* (and) *fascinans*⁶. In this discussion, the sacred or holy producing the fear is Yahweh. The numinous fear or terror that exists in the worshipper of Yahweh or God is then transformed into reverential awe in which trust may predominate⁷. This type of

¹JOSEPH GYANVI-BLAY is an Assistant lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Theology, Christian Service University College, Kumasi-Ghana. He holds an M.A in Religion and Human Values in the University of Cape-Coast, Ghana and has submitted an MPhil thesis awaiting defense in the same field of study. Email: jgblay@csuc.edu.gh, josephgyanviblay69@gmail.com

²Showing evidence and judgment based on reasoning

³ Ettienne Ellis, “Reconsidering the Fear of God in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible in the light of Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige*” OTE27(1),(2014), 82-99.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ potent charm, attractiveness; Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

fear becomes the basis for a covenantal⁸ relationship between Yahweh and devotees or worshippers⁹. This covenant relationship is associated with obedience by devotees which can either be motivated positively by trust in Yahweh or negatively by fear of punishments¹⁰.

According to Ted Hildebrandt, the “fear of God” has been called the motto and the primary starting point of the wisdom literature¹¹. Hildebrandt then defines 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”¹². In other words, the fear of God refers to an emotional experience in a devotee resulting from the consciousness of God which produces a variety of reactions¹³. Again, Hildebrandt explains that the “fear of God” in the Hebrew Bible in general and the wisdom literature needs to be discussed due to the existence of several meanings of the phrase¹⁴. The word “fear” has in it a perceived inability to have control over a situation and the helplessness that one feels to defend oneself from harm. This is compared to the relationship between someone who is powerful, such as a king, feared by a subject or subordinate¹⁵. In the Hebrew Bible is from a root word *yārē*’ which has undergone a semantic development from emotional fear to submission to worship of Yahweh¹⁶. This meaning of fear has been taken over by the Deuteronomistic historian (Deuteronomy) and used as a technical word used for the right relationship with Yahweh with special focus on the authority and obedience to the law of Yahweh given by Moses¹⁷.

With regards to what constitute the wisdom literature, James Crenshaw gives a general list of biblical books such as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes (*Qohelet*), Sirach or Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom of Solomon¹⁸ while John Collins gives his list specifically from the Protestant canon as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes or *Qohelet*¹⁹. The author agrees with Collins’ list which conforms to that of the Hebrew Bible and as such refers to the wisdom literature, in this discussion, as a literary corpus made up of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes which will also be called *Qohelet*.

This paper discusses the topic under the following: The fear of God in the Hebrew Bible, the fear of God in the wisdom literature, the fear of God in Proverbs, the benefits or its importance, definition of the man who fears God in the book of Job, the fear of God in *Qoheleth*, comparison of the concept of the fear of God in the wisdom literature, the fear of God as a unifying factor in the wisdom literature, the fear of God as a principle of wisdom, steps to wisdom, the benefits of acquiring wisdom through the principle of the fear of God. Except otherwise stated all biblical quotations are made from the New Revised Standard Version. The focus of this paper basically, is on the concept of the fear of God in the wisdom literature, but an overview of the Hebrew Bible concerning the issue is given in order to better explain the concept in the light of the Hebrew Bible before delving into the wisdom literature. The implications are from experience and interactions with members of the churches the author has worked as an associate pastor.

Theoretical Framework - The fear of God in the Hebrew Bible Sacred Fear of God

There are different types of the fear of God namely sacred fear of God, punishment fear of God, legal, cultic and moral fear of God²⁰. The “fear of the God” has been associated with Rudolph Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which is referred to as “sacred fear.” Such “sacred fear” is found numerous times in the Hebrew Bible²¹. The first example here is Moses seeking to hide his face, because he was afraid to look at God, in the theophany of the burning bush (Ex. 3:6, cf. Acts 7:32). Exodus 20:18-20 also

⁸solemn agreement that is binding two parties

⁹Ellis, “Reconsidering the Fear of God”, 85.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹Ted Hildebrandt, “Justifying the Fear of the LORD” Proverbs ETS Nov, (Atlanta, 2010), 1-6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³Reactions such as repulsion, attraction, fascination, awe, reverence, love, trust, faith, worship, and adoration

¹⁴Hildebrandt, “Justifying the Fear of the LORD”, 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶Ellis, “Reconsidering the Fear of God”, 85.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament wisdom: An introduction*. (3ed.) (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 4.

¹⁹John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: Study guide*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg fortress Press), 2

²⁰Hildebrandt, “Justifying the Fear of the LORD”, 1.

²¹ Ibid.

gives an account of Yahweh's terrifying presence accompanied with lightning and thundering coming towards the people of Israel and as such the people had to ask Moses not to allow Yahweh to come but would go to Yahweh to listen to him on their behalf.

Hilderbrandt goes further to include a moral dimension to the meaning of *mysterium tremendum* from Exodus 20:19,20 where "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 Yahweh's theophanic appearances and mighty deeds in history but also to the holiness and incomparability of his being²². In Job 42:1-3 Job declares in a statement as follows: "Then Job answered the LORD: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know". This explains the awfulness and incomparability of Yahweh hence affirming the sacred fear of God.

The above explanation has an implication for the general attitude of Ghanaians especially Christians, to God which is explained below. In the biblical account above the theophany or Yahweh's physical manifestation to his people instilled the sacred fear where the people were afraid to die, but now a Ghanaian Christian believes that God has manifested himself in Jesus Christ so there is no physical presence of God that intimidated people as in the biblical times any more. In view of this, the author believes the sacred fear of God in Christians has been reduced and as such a lot of them misbehave in church. Such misbehavior may be seen in the unnecessary use of the mobile phones during church services, people conversing with each other while the service is still in progress and putting unwanted material like old currencies and torn cedi in the offering bowls during offering time. This sacred fear must be rekindled in people in general and Christians in particular if they believe the God they are worshipping is the same as that in the Hebrew Bible and has not changed.

Punishment Fear of God

When one looks closely at the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in the light of the sacred fear of God coupled with theophanic appearances and divine incomparability, a devotee is sometimes captured with a fear of punishment if any devotee has committed a sin²³. This type of fear of God is illustrated by Adam and Eve hiding after their sin in the garden²⁴. Psalm 90 also highlights this fear of punishment in verse 7 as follows: "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."

Wisdom literature records in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 that the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil". In this passage *Qoheleth* reminds all people about an impending judgment that is about to take place. This scripture seems to be one of the main themes and the conclusion of the text hence promoting punishment type of fear. This type of fear in the author's opinion is climaxed by Ecclesiastes 9:12 that says "For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them". From Ecclesiastes 9:12 stated above the writer gives a picture of a situation where humans are told that there is an evil net somewhere that is going to truncate human life suddenly in a manner comparable to a fish. Such picture brings fear in the hearts of people especially devotees who plead for mercy for escape from such net. Even though such evil net is meant for everyone, a devotee becomes more afraid when he or she is doing something wrong. In view of this a devotee will want to attract Yahweh's mercy in order to prolong his or her life against the evil net.

In Job 3:25 the writer says, "Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me". One can deduct from the above that Job had been staying away from evil in order not to incur Yahweh's wrath but unfortunately what he wanted to avoid rather came to him. The author believes it is this same punishment fear that made him make sacrifices on behalf of his children so that in case his children had attracted Yahweh's punishment through any negative disposition of their heart then Job's sacrifice could avert that punishment.

²²Hildebrandt, "Justifying the Fear of the LORD", 4.

²³Hildebrandt, "Justifying the Fear of the LORD", 4

²⁴ Ibid.

Unlike the biblical times, modern Ghanaians, the author's opinion, seem not to live in the consciousness of such fear even among Christians since some Ghanaian Christians believe that they are in the dispensation of grace and as such God does not visit people with instant punishment. In view of this reduced punishment fear of God, there are some church elders and workers handling finance who go to the extent of stealing some of the money or investing some of the church's money in their own businesses without any fear. It would be helpful to the Ghanaian society if such type of fear is awakened in people for a total reformation of society so that even if God is perceived to be far away from Ghanaians, people will still be afraid of being caught by the law of the state when they are found culpable in any wrong doing.

Cultic Fear of God

W. O. E Oesterley and Theodore Robinson indicate that a group of farmers in a community believes that there is a deity responsible for securing good production of crops²⁵. In this case it becomes the aim of the devotees to ensure favourable moods of the deity by performing different types of rites or rituals²⁶. These rites are performed regularly in order to keep the relationship between the devotees and the deity²⁷. In order for such a relationship between Yahweh and devotees to last, the devotees express this relationship in both visible and audible manner which is referred to as a cult.²⁸

With reference to Yahweh, regular offerings and sacrifices are made to renew covenant relationships, to make atonements for sins committed and a regular form of worship given to Yahweh²⁹. Performing these rites or rituals are seen by Yahweh as obedient and renewing loyalty with him. So far as one does these rituals correctly and faithfully, he or she is considered by Yahweh as a sign of fear for him³⁰. This is illustrated in 2Kings 17: 25-40 when the people of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) were deported and the king of Assyria got people from many places to live there and since those people did not make sacrifices, Yahweh considered the people to be people who did not fear God so Yahweh killed them. In Job 1:5 when Job's children have gathered together to eat and drink, Job made sacrifices later for the children in case any of his children might have cursed God in their hearts and this he did regularly. This practice also might have been considered by Yahweh as cultic fear of God.

Sacrifices made in the biblical times are now done in monetary terms and so it reduces the act to anyone not sacrificing at any time to be perceived lacking the cultic fear. Similarly, those refusing to be consistently engaging in other rituals like prayer can also be considered as lacking the cultic fear like one refusing to make sacrifices since prayer and sacrifices are related. Sacrifices like burnt offerings are related to prayer in the sense that the Hebrew word *'ôlāh* used for burnt offering is also used in embarking on a pilgrimage to a sanctuary or ascending a mountain to pray. This makes prayer in the life of a Ghanaian Christian a very important ritual as burnt offering is to an ancient Israelite. In view of this if an Israelite who refused to make sacrifices to Yahweh was considered to lack the fear of God then a Ghanaian Christian who refuses to pray or make monetary sacrifices will also be perceived from the same perspective.

Fear as Respect

Leviticus 19:30 does not refer to emotional "fear" but more cultic reverence directed at the sanctuary itself³¹. One does not "fear" the sanctuary, but one is to respect and reverence it³². Sometimes "fear" is used simply for showing respect with no feeling of emotive "fear"³³. In the above text everyone must have respect both for everything that has been set apart in the sanctuary and also the structure of the sanctuary itself. In Proverbs 13:13 anyone who gives reverence to the commandments of Yahweh is rewarded. In this one does not allow any other person to neither treat what is sacred with contempt nor to utter a word

²⁵W. O. E Oesterley & Theodore H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its origin and development*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 180.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid

²⁸Robert Vannoy, *Foundation of Biblical Prophecy class outline*, Winter. (2007),1.

²⁹Hildebrandt, "Justifying the Fear of the LORD", 4.

³⁰Ibid

³¹Hildebrandt, "Justifying the Fear of the LORD", 6

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

which condemns the sacred. This is illustrated by Job in 2:9 when Job was enraged by the wife's statement to "curse God and die" and condemned the wife even though he was suffering. In this situation Job showed fear as respect for Yahweh. From the above explanation, respect for items and persons dedicated to Yahweh attracted maximum respect but in Ghanaian case, some members of the Churches show disrespect to the sanctuaries or temples by littering their church premises with plastic waste for others to be sweeping. This act is a total disrespect to what is dedicated to God. Another area of concern in the above discussion is the habit of some journalists insulting men of God at the least opportunity. A typical example is Mr Kwesi Pratt, Editor of a private Newspaper insulting the former Presbyterian moderator at the time³⁴.

Legal or Covenantal Fear of God

The legal aspect of the fear of God can be seen in Deuteronomy 6:1-2 which gives the people a legal document that they are to be taught to obey in order to be considered to fear God. In Deuteronomy 6:1-2 there are laid down steps with legal terms like commandments, ordinances and so on. There is a covenant established with stipulations here in which the devotees are to follow diligently and then Yahweh is also to give long life and prosperity. This covenant is to be well taught to the children and all the generation that will descend from them. Hilderbrandt links the Deuteronomy text with Proverbs 10:27 which urges a devotee to obey in order for his or her life to be prolonged. This is a legal or covenantal fear of God³⁵.

In Job 1:9-10 *haššātān* or Satan's question and statement to Yahweh, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land" coupled with Job's commitment to sacrifices to Yahweh and his uprightness suggest that Job might have been in a kind of covenant with Yahweh. It can be deduced from the above that, Job has the responsibility of being both morally upright as well as being ritually in good standing so that Yahweh will also on his part be committed to protecting and blessing him.

The moral Fear of God

Sometimes a devotee of Yahweh may consider it as a duty to conduct himself or herself in line with the fear of God. For the reason of perpetuating high moral values in his people, Yahweh chose Abraham to "...direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just..." (Genesis 18:19; New International Version). This means after Yahweh establishing a covenant with Abraham, Yahweh mandated him to set the moral standard that will be replicated by all his descendants. In this case every member of Abraham's descendants would see it as a moral mandate to follow the precepts laid down by Abraham in order to fear God. In Job 2:3 it is stated that "Job fears God" and might have raised his children in the fear of God. This can be inferred from 1:5 where Job made sacrifices for his children to atone for their sins "in case they cursed God in their hearts". With the above author is sure that Job would have been educating his children hence his reason for the sacrifice for them to abstain from any evil and to fear God. The *Qoheleth* concludes that fearing God and keeping his commandments is the duty of everyone, hence making the fear of God a moral obligation for everyone. Here, the author believes the moral obligation given is for all people of all generation. Hence if Ghanaians can live in accordance with moral laws the Ghanaian society could be reformed.

The moral fear of God, legal or covenantal fear of God, fear as respect, cultic fear of God, sacred fear of God are the types of fear of God that the author has observed from scholars and all these types are portrayed by the people of Israel at different times and also illustrated by Job's life. Lindsay Wilson believes that the concept of fear of Yahweh is also woven into the fabric of the wisdom books, in which Israel's salvation history is strangely absent³⁶. Attention now will be placed on the wisdom literature.

Methodology

Having read through some of the passages of the wisdom literature the concept of the fear of God seems to dominate and in order to understand the concept a content analysis of the books of the wisdom literature

³⁴cited in Peacefmonline. Daniel Adu Darko KwesiPratt *Must Apologize To Presby Moderator AndEntire Christian Fraternity*, <https://www.peacefmonline.com> Last updated 16/03/2015, Retrieved 13/10/2019).

³⁵Hildebrandt, "Justifying the Fear of the LORD", 6

³⁶Lindsay Wilson, "The book of Job and the fear of God" *Tyndale Bulletin* 46:1, (1995), 59-61.

has been done. In the exercise the content of each book is analysed to bring out the various definitions of the concept, how the concept has been explained or the perspectives of the concept being espoused in the books. This exercise includes the various benefits prescribed in each book of the wisdom literature.

The Fear of God: Wisdom Literature

Some scholars have even regarded the fear of God as the central controlling idea of wisdom literature. Wilson quotes Kaiser saying:

The fear of the Lord was the dominating concept and organizing theological principle in wisdom literature. It was the response of faith to the divine word of promise and blessing just as it had functioned in the days of Abraham and Moses³⁷.

This implies that the concept of the fear of God is the predominating principle in wisdom literature and it is also the foundation on which Yahweh established his covenant with Abraham. This can be explained by the fact that Yahweh called Abraham, promising him a land and a variety of blessings while Abraham was to respond by faith and conducting himself in the fear of God. It can be concluded in this case that as the concept featured in the relationship between Yahweh and Abraham, so also is the concept featuring in wisdom literature. The fear of God in the various books will be dealt with starting from the book of Proverbs.

Definition of the concept of the Fear of God in Proverbs

Wilson reveals that the phrase 'the fear of the LORD' occurs frequently in Proverbs. Proverbs defines the fear of God in several ways which are:

1. Proverbs 1:7 defines the fear of God as the beginning or the first principle of knowledge.
2. 1:29 says it is an important item that needs to be chosen.
3. 2:4-5 also states that it is a way of living that can be mastered and must also be searched for.
4. 8:13 says the fear God is to hate evil and all its ways. 6:16-19 goes ahead to spell out the evil which are considered as an abomination that Yahweh hates, and they are haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands shedding innocent blood, a heart devising wicked plans, feet hurrying into evil, a lying witness or falsely testifier, and one who sows discord in a family.
5. 9:10 states it is the beginning of wisdom.
6. 15:33, it is the instruction of wisdom.
7. It is a constant state for one who trusts in the LORD (23:17).
8. The perfect woman of 31:10-31 is one who fears God, which is defining a perfect wife³⁸.

The fear of God therefore in Ghanaians will reduce crimes, bloodshed and violence and reform the Ghanaian society if the people consider the above definitions. From the above, every Ghanaian who fears God is the one who keeps away from bloodshed, violence, false testimony against the innocent especially in court and so on.

The benefits or its importance

Proverbs also gives the benefits or importance for those who conduct their lives in the fear of God. The benefits are:

1. It leads to a longer life (10:27).
2. The fear of God gives security and is a fountain of life (14:26-27).
3. It is more valuable than great treasure (15:16).
4. It is better than gold (16:6).
5. It leads to life and gives satisfaction (19:23).
6. Its reward is riches, honour and life³⁹. Therefore, the concept of the fear of God is significant to the reformation of societies.

2.9.2 Definition of the man who fears God in the book of Job

³⁷Wilson, "The book of Job and the fear of God" 61.

³⁸Wilson, "The book of Job and the fear of God", 61

³⁹Ibid.

1. In this book, the narrator defines such a person who fears God as one who turns away from evil and lives a blameless and upright life (1:1).
2. Yahweh repeats the narrator's definition as one who turns away from evil and lives a blameless and upright life (1:8)
3. Job, from his experience says that the fear of God is not just beginning of wisdom but wisdom itself (28:28).

In other words, the fear of God is defined by Job as an embodiment of wisdom. Job states it clearer by adding that staying away from evil also shows understanding. Job then gives a practical demonstration of the fear of God in the sense that he demonstrated all the types of the fear of Yahweh and concluded with his definition. Even though Job's fear of God did not solve his problem, he maintained his integrity until he received his restoration. Job's practical demonstration shows more or less a legal or covenantal fear of God where the former was loyal to the covenant irrespective of what happened to him. Hence "... the LORD restored the fortunes of Job... and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before (42:10)".

Benefits of the Fear of God in the book of Job

1. From Satan's testimony in 1:9-10,
 - A. A hedge is built around one who fears God.
 - B. The work of his or her hands is blessed.
 - C. His or her possessions are increased.
2. From Eliphaz conversation in 4:6, the fear of God is a confidence and a hope to the one who fears God in times of crisis.
3. From Job in 28:28, we learn that it is a source of wisdom and understanding.
4. From Job's experience in 42:10, he received a double restoration of all that he lost.

The fear of God in *Qoheleth*

Robert McCabe reveals that *Qoheleth's* experience in life made him conclude that nothing or no one can withstand the blow of death and so advised young people to enjoy the opportunities at their disposal⁴⁰. *Qoheleth* further adds that whiles they enjoy life they should do so with the fear of God since Yahweh will bring everything to judgment. The *Qoheleth* therefore sees the fear of God as the whole of man and it is stated in 12:13-14 literally as follows: "The end of the matter or word has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments because this is whole of man because God will bring every deed in judgment together with everything hidden, whether good or evil". In this passage the fear of God is seen as the whole of the life of every person. *Qoheleth* sees everything in the world as vanity or wind or breath that soon goes away so there is nothing left for one except the fear of God.

Thomas Constable makes three observations. Firstly, *Qoheleth* reveals that every human endeavor lacks ultimate value. All is vanity in that sense⁴¹. Secondly, people should live a life in the fear of God and enjoy life as much as they can. He observes that people should enjoy life in their youth, while at the same time remembering that God will judge their lives⁴²(11:9-10). Thirdly, failing to fear God will result in a dull life. When one fears God, it makes one to live in harmony with Yahweh's will and this results in a life of fullness⁴³. The benefit of the fear of God in this book (8:12) is that it is always well with those who fear him.

Comparison of the Concept of the Fear of God

Similarities: Ecclesiastes 12:13 is very similar to Proverbs 1:7 and 3:5-6: "Fear God and keep his commandment"⁴⁴. Secondly, in all the books, the fear of God is the prerequisite for successful living here and now⁴⁵.

Differences: The difference between Ecclesiastes and Proverbs is that in *Qoheleth* the emphasis is on the inability of every human endeavor to provide ultimate value. In Proverbs, the emphasis is on the

⁴⁰Robert V. McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes" *DBSJ 1 spring*, (1996), 85.

⁴¹Thomas L. Constable (2017) <http://www.soniclight.com> Retrieved 25/5/2017

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Constable <http://www.soniclight.com>

⁴⁵Ibid.

comparative value of living in the fear of God⁴⁶. Proverbs sees the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom, Job see the fear of God as an embodiment of wisdom, while Ecclesiastes sees the fear of God as life.

The Fear of God -as a unifying factor

When you compare the concept of the fear of God it has been observed to have been carefully arranged wisdom literature. It conforms to the arrangement of the books in the *Ketuvim* or the writings of the Hebrew Bible in the sense that the arrangement starts with Proverbs, Job and the *Qoheleth*. It is in this light that “the fear of God” comes into the picture as early as Proverbs 1:7, climaxing it with the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom in 9:10. The concept of the fear of God enters the book of Job as wisdom itself in Job 28:28. The concept of the fear of God then concludes every activity of life wisdom literature at the tail end as the whole of man or the totality of life itself in *Qoheleth* 12:13,14 in the Hebrew Bible. With this in mind the author does not think the fear of God coming to the tail end means a later addition as some scholars seem to suggest but, in his opinion, a calculated arrangement of the concept being introduced in Proverbs and then concluding the wisdom literature in *Qoheleth*.

Proverbs seems to suggest that life is in harmony with the principles of the universe as a result of good things happening in the society but Job questions this assertion and *Qoheleth* even gives a sharp antithesis that asserts that being pious gives no good end⁴⁷. Despite these contradictions existing wisdom literature there may be some unifying elements. One of the unifying elements identified is the concept of the fear of God. This unifying factor makes a gradual progression from it being the beginning of wisdom at the beginning wisdom literature up to the conclusion of every matter where the fear of God is the life itself at the concluding sections of the *Qoheleth*.

As a Principle of wisdom

The concept of the fear of the God as the principle of wisdom can hardly escape notice as a link between wisdom and a main religious theme⁴⁸. Apart from its relevance to present debates, such an often-quoted brief saying would deserve special study⁴⁹. Many writers led by Derek Kidner call it the motto, or the keyword (Berend Gemser) of wisdom writings⁵⁰. Blocher points out von Rad’s conviction that the concept of the fear of God is both Israel’s entire theory of knowledge and Israel’s most special possession⁵¹.

The expression ‘fear of Yahweh’ is frequently attested to in the Hebrew Bible and has a correspondingly wide range of meaning. In a few prominent passages as shown above it means obedience to the divine will, and it is in this sense that the teachers of wisdom, too, seem to have understood the term⁵². Furthermore, the sentence means, therefore, that the fear of God leads to wisdom. It enables a one to acquire wisdom and trains him or her for wisdom⁵³. Proverbs 2:1-10 gives some steps which must be followed through the fear of God for the acquisition of wisdom.

The Commentary on Proverbs by Charles Bridge explains that the teacher in warning the rebellious mockers now uses laid down principles or steps leading to the fear of God to instruct his or her dutiful children or students⁵⁴. This commentary clearly states that the question asked in Job 28:12, 20, and 21, “where can wisdom be found?” now answered by saying that “it is here before us, as the fear and knowledge of God, preservation from a besetting temptation and a guide into the right and safe path”⁵⁵.

From the interlinear *masoretic* text, the word translated “beginning” in Proverbs 9:10 is in a construct form of *tehillah* which in *Vine’s Dictionary* means praiseworthy deed⁵⁶. In Isaiah 62:7 Israel was once established on the praiseworthy or glorious foundation which is the fear of Yahweh which they lost. In this case, the fear of God can be this praiseworthy (deed) foundation. Therefore, the fear of God is the praiseworthy foundation or principle of wisdom. “The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Crenshaw, Old Testament wisdom, 13.

⁴⁸Henri Blocher “The fear of the lord as the ‘principle’ of wisdom” Tyndale Bulletin, 28, (1977)4.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology the Theology of Israel’s: Historical traditions* volume translated by D. M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), 66.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Charles Bridges, *A commentary on Proverbs* (New York/Pittsburgh: R. Carter, 1847), 13

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶W.E. Vine, Merrill Unger, F., White William, *Vine’s complete expository Dictionary of Hebrew words*. (1940) Number 8416

humility goes before honor” (15:33). “Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (Job 28:28).

There are so much implications of the praise worthy foundation for the Ghanaian society in the sense that there is so much bribery and corruption in high places that needs attention. The corruption perception index 2016 (CPI), a research conducted on corruption by the Ghana Integrity Initiative has it that Ghana ranks second in corruption in West Africa after Senegal, ninth in Africa and seventieth globally⁵⁷. Another survey conducted by Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) led by Ransford Gyampoh from 2014-2016 rated the office of the President as the second most corrupt institution⁵⁸. In a much disturbing situation, 34 judges and 180 judicial officers were caught on tape in Anas’ exposé for taking bribes from accused persons in order to sell justice⁵⁹. Ghanaweb gives also a report of 67 cartons of substances tested to be cocaine seized at the Prampram beach on 21st May 2006; which were kept in the custody of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Headquarters got missing⁶⁰. In view of the above it is advisable for people to go through these principles of the fear of God.

Steps to wisdom

In order to urge people (the one acquiring wisdom from a teacher or a father) to be devoted to wisdom, Michael Fox gives the step by step approach to wisdom through wisdom education using Proverbs 2:1-10. Firstly, from 2:1 “My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you...” this means learning begins with accepting or receiving the father’s (teacher’s) teaching and absorbing it⁶¹. Secondly, (2:2) “Making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding if you indeed cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding”. The father’s teachings are not only a way to wisdom, but they are wisdom itself⁶². Having absorbed the teachings, a person should make all the effort to learn wisdom. “Inclining your heart” means desiring and choosing something after you have paid attention. In this case the father (teacher) is demanding not only attention from people but an attitude of eager receptivity to the teachings⁶³. Thirdly, (2:3) “If you indeed cry out for insight”, in this case, the learner not only pays attention to the father (teacher) but also makes the effort or takes the initiative to call the attention of wisdom⁶⁴. Fourthly, (2:4) “if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures.” From this quotation the learner must also actively strive for wisdom, move towards it, eagerly searching for it as he or she would do if he or she found a hidden or buried treasure (*maṭmônîm*). This requires much effort to find⁶⁵. Fifthly (2:5) “then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God”. At this level the quest for finding wisdom will open the learner to the understanding of the fear of God and the knowledge of God⁶⁶. Sixthly, (2:6) “For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding”. From the above information deliberate search for wisdom produces understanding in the learner⁶⁷. At this level the wisdom acquired creates mature piety which indicates that Yahweh is the source of wisdom and in searching for the wisdom one goes to Yahweh who bestows wisdom upon him or her as a divine gift⁶⁸. Searching for wisdom both starts with the fear of God (1:7; 9:10) and leads to it⁶⁹.

In searching for wisdom, the fear of God becomes conscience which is an inner sense of right and wrong and having the desire to do right. The fear of God is noted to be a conscience that calls for an intellectual adhesion to a principle which establishes a divine order or a concept for good life which is a

⁵⁷Ghana Integrity Initiative (2017) *Corruption Perception Index 2016 press release*. Accra, Ghana, Ofori-Kwafo, L.& Addah, M.A. <https://www.tighanaorg> Retrieved on 20/8/2018

⁵⁸Anas, Anas, Aremeyaw (2015) *How Justice Ajete Nassam collected GH¢16000*. <https://www.graphic.com.gh>. Retrieved on 20/8/2018

⁵⁹Amidu, Martin, B.K., (2010). *The Ghanaian sense of justice: Corrupt judges removed, corrupt attorneys rewarded, and corrupt politicians protected*. <https://www.citifmonline.com> Retrieved on 22/5/2017

⁶⁰Ghanaweb (2008). *Cocaine gone missing at CID headquarters*. <https://www.ghanaweb.com> Retrieved on 20/8/2018

⁶¹Michael V. Fox “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2”. *JBL* 113:2. (1994) 238

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Fox “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2”, 238

⁶⁹ Ibid.

guarantee for success⁷⁰. Seventhly, (2:6) “he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly”. At this stage when the learner has attained matured cognitive conscience, God will protect him or her⁷¹. This protection is not a reward coming from outside the knowledge acquired but consequently resulting from the effort marshaled to get to the level of conscience⁷². This reward from wisdom protects or helps the learner who has acquired the wisdom to see what is good and desires to do it⁷³. Doing what is right preserves the wise person from the danger of sin⁷⁴.

At the end of the process of acquiring wisdom Yahweh has stored up (*špn*) resourcefulness (ingenuity, enterprising and problem-solving ability) and a mental dexterity (*tūšiyā*: mental sharpness and quickness) for those who have acquired wisdom through the fear of God. This inner power or mental sharpness will help the wise man or woman to escape a fixed danger⁷⁵.

In the author’s opinion the above is not just ordinary steps but a moral curriculum designed by the writer for people who must know what is right and can do it. Such moral curriculum must be incorporated into Ghanaian educational programme from the primary to the tertiary level so that by the time anybody is trained to be for example a policeman, a judge, someone working in the office of the president including the president, be trained to know what is right and have the desire to what is right so that the entire Ghanaian society can be reformed.

The benefits of acquiring wisdom through the principle of the fear of God (Proverbs 2:8-12)

1. This wisdom will guard the paths and preserve the way of Yahweh’s just and faithful ones (2:8)⁷⁶.
2. It will help the wise man or woman to understand righteousness, justice and equity for every good path (2:9)⁷⁷.
3. The wise man or woman would have acquired a mature conscience to know what is right and will be delighted in his heart to do it (2:10)⁷⁸.
4. The wise man or woman will receive prudence and understanding that become his or her guard (2:11)⁷⁹.
5. It will save the wise man or woman from the way of evil and from those who speak perverse words (2:12)⁸⁰.

CONCLUSION

Religion is a phenomenon which deals with both rational and non-rational issues including feelings. These feelings expressed by devotees emanate from the Holy. This holy can produce awfulness and overpoweringness in the minds of the adherents. The fear of God therefore is an emotional experience of a complex nature connected with the perception or the awareness of the deity producing reverence and ascertains reaction towards him. The fear of God is the beginning or first principle of knowledge and wisdom. It is also to hate evil. The fear of God acts as an embodiment of wisdom and is seen as one who keeps the commandments of God. The concept of the fear of God is the controlling idea of the wisdom literature. The benefits of the fear of God are longer life, security, increase possessions and a source of confidence in times of crisis.

The implications for national development are that every citizen who acquires the fear of God pursues righteousness, justice and equity which help promote peace and harmony in the country. Secondly, such an individual who acquires it obtains a matured conscience to know what is right and is delighted to do it. From the study it can be recommended that the fear of God which is the moral curriculum must be introduced into the national curriculum from the nursery to the highest educational institution and this will help train people to have the ability to resist corruption at work places.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶those who conduct themselves in the fear of God; Fox “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2”, 239

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amidu, Martin, B.K., *The Ghanaian sense of justice: Corrupt judges removed, corrupt attorneys rewarded, and corrupt politicians protected*, (2010): Retrieved from <https://www.citifmonline.com> on 22/5/2017
- Anas, Anas, Aremeyaw, How *Justice Ajet Nassam collected GH¢16000*, (2015): Retrieved from <https://www.graphic.com.gh> on 20/8/2018
- Blocher, Henri "The fear of the lord as the 'principle' of wisdom" in *Tyndale Bulletin* 28, 3-28, 1977
- Bridges, Charles. *A commentary on Proverbs*. New York/ Pittsburgh: R. Carter. 1847
- Constable, Thomas L. (2017) Retrieved from <http://www.soniclight.com> on 25/5/2017
- Crenshaw, James, L., *Old Testament wisdom: An introduction*. (3ed). Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010
- Ellis, Etienne, "Reconsidering the Fear of God in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*" in *OTE27:1*, 82-99, 2014
- Fox, Michael V. "The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2". in *JBL* 113:2, 237-240, 1994
- Ghana Integrity Initiative, *Corruption Perception Index 2016 press release*. (2017): Accra, Ghana, Ofori-Kwafo, L.& Addah, M.A. Retrieved from <https://www.tighanaorg> on 20/8/2018
- Ghanaweb. *Cocaine gone missing at CID headquarters*. (2008): Retrieved from <https://www.ghanaweb.com> on 20/8/2018
- Hildebrandt, Ted, "Justifying the Fear of the LORD" in *Proverbs ETS Nov*. Atlanta. 1-13, 2010
- Hill, Bryan (2015) Retrieved from <http://www.ancient-origins.net> .on 19/04/2017
- Krause, Jeff (2015) Retrieved from <http://www.emmanuelchapelhelena.org>. on 08/04/2017
- McCabe, Robert V. "The Message of Ecclesiastes" in *DBSJI spring*, 85, 1996
- Oesterley, W. O. E, & Robinson, Theodore, H., *Hebrew Religion: Its origin and development*. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1930
- Reuter, Jason (2016) Retrieved from <http://www.owlcation.com> on 17/04/2017
- Vannoy, Robert. *Foundation of Biblical Prophecy class outline*, Winter, 2007
- Vine, W.E., Unger, Merrill, F., William, White. *Vine's complete expository Dictionary of Hebrew words*. 8416. 1940
- Von Rad, Gerhard. *Old Testament Theology the Theology of Israel's: Historical traditions* volume translated by D. M. G. Stalker. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd. 1973
- Wilson, Lindsay "The book of Job and the fear of God" in *Tyndale Bulletin* 46:1, 59-79, 1995