

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

THE FEAR OF GOD:  
ETHICAL ATTITUDE, EPISTEMOLOGICAL STARTING POINT, AND END FOR A LIFE  
FULL OF UNKNOWNNS

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## Introduction

This paper argues that the fear of God is an emotional response to God that serves as the starting point for ethics, epistemology, and the end point for a life inundated by the unknown. That is, the fear of God refers to an emotional response to God that grounds religious devotion to Him. Although usually consisting of two nouns in a construct relationship, the fear of God needs to be understood as a compound word.<sup>1</sup> As such, the term can be defined in a systematic way. This paper seeks to synthesize the various elements of the fear of God found in the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. However, each of these books also contribute a distinctive perspective on the fear of God. Thus, this paper will first establish a domain for the distinctive meanings of אָרַא (fear). Next the contributions of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes will be explored. Then it will set forth a synthesized description of the fear of God. Finally, the relationship between fearing God and wisdom will be considered. The contention of this paper is that the fear of God and wisdom are bound together by the revelation of God, particularly as it is found in the Scriptures.

## Domain of אָרַא

אָרַא may be generally understood along two lines of meaning: אָרַא as emotion and אָרַא as piety.<sup>2</sup> As a term stressing emotion, אָרַא is used in contexts where there is a dangerous condition

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Waltke writes, “Even as one will not understand ‘butterfly’ by analyzing ‘butter’ and ‘fly’ independently, so also ‘fear of the LORD’ cannot be understood by studying ‘fear’ and ‘the LORD’ in isolation from each other. The expression is a compound” (*The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], 100).

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Peter LeMaster, “Polysemy in Biblical Hebrew: Examining the Semantic Domain of Fear in the Book of Job” (Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2022), 86.

or circumstance.<sup>3</sup> Occurrences in wisdom literature books include Job 5:21, 22; 6:21; 9:35; 11:15; 32:6; Proverbs 3:25; 31:21; Ecclesiastes 12:5. Relative to piety, אִירָא is used in reference to a theological position or response to God. Uses in this category include Job 1:1, 8, 9; 2:3; 4:6; 6:14; 15:4; 22:4; 28:28; 37:22, 24; Proverbs 1:7; 3:7, 10; 14:2, 16; 24:21; 31:30; Ecclesiastes 5:6; 7:18; 8:12, 13; 12:13. It should be noted that there is an observable development in the use of אִירָא, wherein the emotional sense that appears in Job seems to give way to the pietistic sense that predominates in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Nevertheless, these data suggest that recognizing the concurrence of both senses is best so that neither is excluded from consideration.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, fear as emotion and fear as piety are established semantic domains for אִירָא. This overview provides an onramp to the distinctive contributions to the meaning of “fear of God” in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

### **Distinguishing the Fear of God**

To understand and articulate the fear of God, it is necessary first to grasp the distinctive contributions of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. There is much agreement between the three, which allows for the term to be systematically studied across the books. While there is agreement, each book offers its own voice to make the systematic melody sound more like a harmony. It will be shown below that Job offers a view of the fear of God that serves as the starting point for ethical conduct. On the other hand, Proverbs draws attention to the relationship between a theory of knowledge and the fear of God. Finally, Ecclesiastes follows the path of the

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<sup>3</sup> LeMaster, 87–88, 95.

<sup>4</sup> This is the conclusion of LeMaster (103). He writes, “What is important to note is that אִירָא is used concurrently as fear and piety.”

perplexities of life and still exhorts humanity to begin with the fear of God even when it comes to the end of the matter.

### Job: Starting Point for Ethical Conduct

A fundamental issue in the book of Job is whether God may be trusted in His rule over the world.<sup>5</sup> By the end of three cycles of speeches, Job and his three friends are no closer to the truth about Job's sufferings than when he began lamenting his birth in chapter three. The only points of agreement seem to be that God is sovereign and the wicked deserve their fate.

Nevertheless, they cannot agree on whether Job is innocent or wicked.<sup>6</sup> Often called "the wisdom chapter,"<sup>7</sup> Job 28 emphasizes that these points demonstrate the limits and failures of the human mind to penetrate the knowledge of God and His ways.<sup>8</sup> Central to the point of Job 28 is the climax of the chapter in verse 28.

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<sup>5</sup> Summarizing God's speeches in Job 38–41, Clines notes, "All that Job learns from God is that retribution is not the issue, but whether God can be trusted to run his world" (David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary 17 [Dallas, TX: Word, 1989], xlvi).

<sup>6</sup> These points are found in the summary speech from Job in chapters 26–27. See Robert L. Alden, *Job*, The New American Commentary 11 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 257.

<sup>7</sup> Alden, 269.

<sup>8</sup> Andersen writes, "[Job 28] sums up the case as it stands at this point. It emphasizes the failure of the human mind to arrive at the hidden wisdom" (Francis I. Andersen, *Job*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 14 [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1976], 241). Scholarship is divided over the identity of the speaker in Job 28. Some say Job is the speaker (Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014], 277–78). Others suggest that the chapter is an interlude between the first cycle of speeches in chapters 3–27 and the second cycle in chapters 29–42 (Alden, *Job*, 269; Andersen, *Job*, 241; Gregory Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138, no. 550 [1981]: 141). Clines reorders the chapters so that it serves as the climax of Elihu's four speeches in chapters 32–37 (*Job 21–37*, Word Biblical Commentary 18 [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006], 908–9; "'The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom' (Job 28:28): A Semantic and Contextual Study," in *Job 28: Cognition in Context*, Biblical Interpretation Series 64 [Leiden: Brill, 2003], 78–80). Although in substantial agreement that Job is the speaker in chapter 28, the arguments in this paper do not require that conclusion. Therefore, this paper does not address this issue.

Before analyzing Job 28:28, an overview of chapter 28 is necessary to set the verse in its context. The question at the heart of the chapter concerns the location of wisdom.<sup>9</sup> It begins with the acknowledgement that man knows how to mine for precious stones (vv. 1–11), but he does not know where to find wisdom or understanding (vv. 12–22). In fact, he does not even know its value (v. 13). Only God knows where to find wisdom since it was a part of His ordering of creation (vv. 23–27).<sup>10</sup>

As the emphatic point of chapter 28, verse 28 is set apart and highlighted as a word from God to man (וַיֹּאמֶר לְאָדָם).<sup>11</sup> This interruption of the poem serves the message about wisdom’s location by pointing to something outside of itself.<sup>12</sup> Following this is a second point of emphasis: the reported speech begins with הִנֵּה (“behold”),<sup>13</sup> which is a particle that points forward and draws attention to the clauses that follow.<sup>14</sup> The substance of the speech consists of a

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<sup>9</sup> Clines, *Job 21–37*, 922.

<sup>10</sup> Alden, *Job*, 277; Clines, *Job 21–37*, 923. Within the context of Job, the speech cycles of chapters 3–27 have established this point. Job knows that he is upright, so his suffering cannot be the result of wrongdoing. But this is also the very point that the friends assert about Job. In their own ways, each of them claim that Job’s suffering must indicate some wrongdoing on his part. Notably, they can only make this claim based on what they can observe, have experienced, or what others have said. Yet, none of them can appeal to something that the reader knows based on chapters 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> That God is the speaker is confirmed by tracing the antecedent to אֱלֹהִים in verse 23.

<sup>12</sup> Clines notes that these words are not part of the poem, which intentionally sets them apart and indicates that “the key to the whole poem somehow stands outside it” (*Job 21–37*, 923).

<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

<sup>14</sup> Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, Second (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), §44.3.4. The authors state that the particle’s semantic function “is to *focus attention on the utterance* that follows it” (emphasis in original). Joüon-Muraoka concur, adding that the same is true about הִנֵּה: “In order to attract attention to what is perceived by a speaker, narrator or by a character in a narration as new, important or surprising, one uses the presentative adverb הִנֵּה *Behold! Look!*, nearly always clause-initial” (Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* [Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006], §105d).

tripartite nominal clause.<sup>15</sup> The nominal phrase יִרְאַת אֲדֹנָי (“the fear of the Lord”) serves as the subject, חֲכָמָה (“wisdom”) as the object, and the pronoun הִיא provides emphasis within the clause.<sup>16</sup> That is, the translation would emphasize the equation between the fear of the Lord and wisdom, such as, “the fear of the Lord *is* wisdom.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, a foundational element to wisdom is the fear of the Lord.<sup>18</sup>

The second clause specifies the ethical nature of the fear of the Lord since the rejection of evil is set in parallel. The *qal* infinitive construct סָרַר carries the sense of departure or “turning from illegitimate cultic or ethical practice.”<sup>19</sup> With the accompanying preposition, the object that is turned away from is מַרְעַע (“evil”). Rounding out the clause, בִּינָה (“understanding”) is put in apposition to “turning away from evil” and is set in parallel with “wisdom” from the preceding clause. Thus, the construct constrains the fear of the Lord and wisdom to an ethical category.

Therefore, to identify the meaning of the fear of God according to Job 28:28, there are three points to draw out. First, wisdom is accessible to man, despite his inability to locate it. It is accessible because God tells him what it is (וַיֹּאמֶר לְאָדָם).<sup>20</sup> Second, fearing God is foundational to wisdom as indicated by the emphatic pronoun in the tripartite nominal clause ( יִרְאַת אֲדֹנָי הִיא )

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<sup>15</sup> Joüon and Muraoka, *Joüon-Muraoka*, §154i; Takamitsu Muraoka, “The Tripartite Nominal Clause Revisited,” in *The Verbless Clause in Biblical Hebrew: Linguistic Approaches*, ed. Cynthia L. Miller, Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 189.

<sup>16</sup> Muraoka, “Tripartite Nominal Clause Revisited,” 200; see also *Joüon-Muraoka*, §154j.

<sup>17</sup> Contra. Clines, “The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom,” 73–75.

<sup>18</sup> Alden, *Job*, 277.

<sup>19</sup> David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), s.v. סָרַר.

<sup>20</sup> Andersen writes, “How is that wisdom which is bodied forth in the storm [40:9] to be realized by a man? By being—a man!” (*Job*, 247).

חֲכָמָה). Third, this wisdom that is fearing God provides the impetus to reject doing evil (וְסוּר מִרָע). Implied in this rejection is the positive teaching that wisdom embraces upright ethical behavior. Additionally, this is how Job is characterized at the beginning of the book. He is one who fears God and turns away from evil (1:1, וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים וְסָר מִרָע).<sup>21</sup> Thus, the meaning of the fear of God in Job 28:28 is described as a foundational starting point for ethical conduct in life.

### Proverbs: Foundational Epistemology for Life

There are three verses in Proverbs that warrant exegetical study for ascertaining the meaning of the fear of God. First, Proverbs 1:7a states יִרְאַת יְהוָה רֵאשִׁית דָּעַת (“the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge”).<sup>22</sup> The subject of the clause is יִרְאַת יְהוָה (“the fear of Yahweh”). Considered separately, the words suggest an emotionally fearful response to the covenant God of Israel.<sup>23</sup> However, the phrase as a whole suggests that it is operating as a catchphrase that is more than the sum of its parts.<sup>24</sup> With this in mind, the significance of the clause’s predicate is clarified. That the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge means that

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<sup>21</sup> Andersen concludes, “How is that wisdom ... to be realized by a man? By being—a man! And by realizing what is quite accessible to all men, and most difficult for them, *the fear of the Lord* which made Job himself the exemplar of wisdom, a clean and straight man, devoted to God, shunning evil (1:1)” (247, emphasis in original).

<sup>22</sup> As a verbless clause, there is no finite verb in Proverbs 1:7a. For translation into English, a copulative verb must be supplied. However, supplying a verb in English does not necessarily change how the clause should be understood.

<sup>23</sup> Waltke identifies this as the “non-rational aspect” of the fear of the Lord (*Proverbs 1–15*, 101). See also Clines, “The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom,” 58, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Kaiser writes, “The fear of the Lord was the dominating concept and organizing theological principle in wisdom literature” (Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978], 17). See also Daniel I. Block, “‘That They May All Fear Me’: Interpreting and Preaching Hebrew Wisdom,” *Journal of Baptist Theology and Missions* 13, no. 2 (2016): 74; Lindsay Wilson, “The Book of Job and the Fear of God,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1995): 61; Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 180–81.



the epistemological starting point for knowledge is a faith commitment to God.<sup>25</sup> The word ראשית (“beginning”) supports this assertion. While ראשית can mean “essence” or “chief part,” Murphy concludes that the word means “beginning” or “starting point” based on the parallel usage of תחלה in Proverbs 9:10.<sup>26</sup> Kidner concurs, “‘Beginning’ [refers to] the first and controlling principle.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the fear of Yahweh serves as an epistemological starting point.

Second, Proverbs 9:10 reads in much the same way as 1:7: יִרְאַת יְהוָה וְדַעַת :תְּחִלַּת חִכְמָה יִרְאַת יְהוָה וְדַעַת :קְדוּשִׁים בִּינָה. Similar elements include the use of יִרְאַת יְהוָה (“the fear of Yahweh”) and repetition of the words חִכְמָה (“wisdom”) and דַּעַת (“knowledge”). Although these latter words are used in a different place in 1:7, this suggests that the terms חִכְמָה and דַּעַת are synonymous. Different elements include the substitution of תְּחִלַּת for ראשית,<sup>28</sup> and the inclusion of בִּינָה (“understanding”) as another synonym for חִכְמָה and דַּעַת. Lastly, קְדוּשִׁים stands in parallel to יִרְאַת יְהוָה, serving as the object of דַּעַת (“knowledge”). This parallel statement confirms the

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<sup>25</sup> Block writes, “A faith commitment to the God of Israel who has revealed himself through particular saving acts is a given in the wisdom writings. It is prerequisite to seeing reality as it truly is and to order one’s life accordingly. Wisdom stands or falls according to the right attitude of a person to God” (“That They May All Fear Me,” 74). See also Waltke, who suggests that the term “fear of the Lord” “refers to the Lord’s special revelation, whether through Moses or Solomon. By this term Solomon traces his wisdom back to the Lord’s inspiration” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 101).

<sup>26</sup> Rowland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary 22 (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 56. See also Block, “That They May All Fear Me,” 72; Henri Blocher, “The Fear of the Lord as the ‘Principle’ of Wisdom,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977): 15. Garrett supports this interpretation, writing, “The meaning is not that the fear of the Lord is one aspect of wisdom, even the best, but that it is the place from which the search for wisdom must begin” (Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993], 54).

<sup>28</sup> Waltke comments, “The ambiguity of [Prov 1:7] is resolved by the unambiguous word for ‘beginning of’ (*tehillat*) in the parallel passage of 9:10, pointing to the first meaning [i.e., temporal meaning of ‘first thing’]. However, the temporally first step in this case is not on a horizontal axis that can be left behind but on a vertical axis on which all else rests” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 181).

meaning of 1:7. The fear of Yahweh is the starting point for wisdom.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, “knowledge of the holy one” stands in parallel to the fear of Yahweh, which further clarifies the meaning of the latter term. It refers to knowing the God who made Himself known to Israel.<sup>30</sup>

Third, Proverbs 15:33 adds to 1:7 and 9:10 with further information: יְרֵאת יְהוָה מוֹסֵר (“the fear of Yahweh is the discipline leading to wisdom, and before glory comes humility”).<sup>31</sup> Although a nominal clause usually calls for the translation to supply a copulative verb, in this case the parallel assertion suggests the idea of location is more appropriate. If honor or glory is preceded (לְפָנַי, “before”) by humility,<sup>32</sup> then it follows that the fear of Yahweh precedes wisdom.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, wisdom is constrained or corrected by מוֹסֵר (“instruction”) that comes from the fear of Yahweh.<sup>34</sup>

Putting these three texts together, the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge (1:7), the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom (9:10), and wisdom is preceded by the fear of Yahweh (15:33). Therefore, the fear of Yahweh in Proverbs is a foundational epistemology for life. That is, a theory of knowledge ought to begin with God and His revelation. Practically, this starting point intentionally submits to God and His revelation what can be known. In comparison to Job 28, this meaning may be implicit. However, Proverbs explicitly expands Job’s point beyond ethics by submitting the realm of knowledge under the fear of God.

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<sup>29</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 115.

<sup>31</sup> Garrett suggests the translation “the fear of the Lord is wisdom’s correction” (153n314).

<sup>32</sup> NB “humility” is equated with the fear of Yahweh in Proverbs 2:24.

<sup>33</sup> Kidner writes, “The fear of the Lord is not merely the gateway but the whole path of wisdom” (*Proverbs*, 111).

<sup>34</sup> *DCH*, s.v. מוֹסֵר.

### Ecclesiastes: End Point for a Life of Unknowns

Of the three wisdom books studied in this paper, Ecclesiastes may make the most distinctive contribution to understanding the fear of God. Unlike Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes curbs its assertions about wisdom or knowledge in relation to the fear of God. Rather than direct statements, it calls for a response of fear in light of certain unchangeable realities in the world. These exhortation-type statements make four appearances in the book. The first three only need to be surveyed for the purpose of this paper. First, 3:14 says the unchangeableness of God's plan is a reality.<sup>35</sup> However, rather than promote fatalism, this reality has the purpose that men would fear God. Second, in 5:7 the Preacher counsels refraining from making rash vows because of the unknowns about tomorrow and because of God's anger. Instead, they should fear God.<sup>36</sup> Although distinctively a part of the Preacher's way of saying things (see the claim גַּם־יִוְדַע אֲנִי), the third exhortation-type, found in 8:12–13, states that maintaining a public conviction about God leads to a persevering hatred of sin despite the endurance of sinners.<sup>37</sup> Together these three passages capture a few of the main points of Ecclesiastes. God is free; man is limited in his knowledge; and life is brief and full of contingencies.<sup>38</sup> According to Ecclesiastes, God should be feared for these reasons.

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<sup>35</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 176.

<sup>36</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 310–11.

<sup>37</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 176–77.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 345.

The conclusion of the book provides these points as the entire message of Ecclesiastes.<sup>39</sup> The conclusion states, סוף דְבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים יִרָא וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתָיו שְׂמֹר כִּי-יִזָּה כָּל-הָאָדָם: (12:13; “The end of the matter, all that has been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, because this is everything for man”). That this is a conclusion is signaled in two ways: סוף דְבַר (“the end of the matter”) and הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע (“all has been heard”).<sup>40</sup> These statements set up for summary commands that reflect the contents of the book. God is to be feared and His revealed commands are to be obeyed. This order seems to be important. Eaton writes, “Conduct derives from worship. A knowledge of God leads to obedience; not vice versa.”<sup>41</sup> This counsel is universal (כִּי-יִזָּה כָּל-הָאָדָם).<sup>42</sup> Not only does mankind need to embrace its ignorance and mortality, but also “its dependence on God.”<sup>43</sup>

For the purpose of defining the fear of God, this conclusion emphasizes an ethic based on God’s revealed will and nature.<sup>44</sup> The distinctive contribution of Ecclesiastes is that this statement comes at the end rather than the beginning of the book. That is, not only is the fear of

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<sup>39</sup> Although this paper presupposes that the epilogue of Ecclesiastes (12:9–14) is original to the book, defending this is beyond the scope of this paper. On this topic and the coherence of the epilogue as a summary of the message of Ecclesiastes, see Andrew G. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48, no. 1 (1997): 67–91.

<sup>40</sup> Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), 126; Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 344.

<sup>41</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 177.

<sup>42</sup> Garrett succinctly states, “To obey God is to be truly human” (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 344).

<sup>43</sup> Garrett, 344. Garrett continues, “And yet the conclusion is not surprising. It not only flows naturally from all that has gone before but is the book’s final look at Gen 2–3.”

<sup>44</sup> Murphy writes, “Qoheleth’s understanding of what it means to fear God seems to flow from the mystery and incomprehensibility of God. If one cannot understand what God is doing (3:11; 8:17; 11:6), and indeed if one does not perceive either divine love or hatred (9:1), reverential fear is in order (cf. 3:14; 5:6)” (*Ecclesiastes*, lxvi).

God the beginning of knowledge, it is also its end.<sup>45</sup> Thus, in Ecclesiastes, the emphasis of the fear of God forces the reader back to what is known about God in light of what cannot be known about life.

In sum, the meaning of the fear of God in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes is nuanced according to each book's specific purpose. In Job, the fear of God emphasizes the ethical impact on life. In Proverbs, the fear of God provides an epistemological starting point. In Ecclesiastes, the fear of God leads people back to the God that is known in revelation despite all the unknowns of life. With these distinctions in mind, the next section attempts to synthesize the meaning of the fear of God.

### **Synthesizing the Fear of God**

Each of the wisdom books discussed above offers its own nuanced contribution to the meaning of the fear of God. However, these contributions may also coalesce toward a synthesized meaning. This section argues that the fear of God is an emotional response toward God that is rooted in the epistemological starting point of God's revelation. Furthermore, it produces an ethically upright life. Each of these assertions are expanded upon below.

#### An Emotional Response toward God

The fear of God refers to an emotional response toward God. As discussed in the overview of **יָרָא**, this is the most general description of the term. This is due to the meaning of **יָרָא** ("fear"). According to Clines, **יָרָא** refers to the emotion of fear, which is a "correct

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<sup>45</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 176–77.

response to the divine.”<sup>46</sup> Waltke concurs, identifying the fear of God as containing a “non-rational aspect,” which is an emotional response of fear, love, and trust.<sup>47</sup> Elihu provides a summary statement of how God’s greatness causes men to fear Him (Job 37:22–24).<sup>48</sup> God is full of נֹרָא הוֹד (“fearful splendor”), שְׂגִי־אֲכֹחַ (“great in power”), and וּמִשְׁפָּט וְרַב־צְדָקָה לֹא יַעֲנֶה (“executes justice and righteousness without oppression”). Consequently, men ought to fear God (לִבְנֵי יִרְאוּהוּ אֲנָשִׁים). When these parts are put together, God’s essential nature is the cause for people to fear Him. This leads to the conclusion that the fear of God as an emotional response to God is foundational to the meaning of the term, even as other elements may overshadow it.<sup>49</sup>

### An Epistemological Starting Point

The fear of God is rooted in the epistemological starting point of God’s revelation. This assertion is supported by the exegesis of the passages in Proverbs and the observations of Ecclesiastes 12:13–14. In using the term רֵאשִׁית (“beginning”) and connecting it to דַעַת (“knowledge”) and חֵכְמָה (“wisdom”), Proverbs grounds its message and counsel in a

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<sup>46</sup> Clines, *Job 21–37*, 924. See also Clines, “The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom,” 67, 69–70. He writes,

As far as the “fear of God” is concerned, I conclude that, while no doubt to fear God implies also to be in awe of him and to show him respect, and while those who fear God engage in appropriate ethical and religious behaviour precisely because they fear the consequences of not doing so, these can only be connotations of “fear”; the terms for “fear” studied above mean no more and no less than the emotion of fear.

<sup>47</sup> Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Andersen writes, “A final acknowledgment of God’s *terrible majesty* (22) prepares for final affirmations of his greatness. . . . Verse 24 is then the finishing touch, the application to men, especially Job” (*Job*, 287–88).

<sup>49</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 9:201; G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 6:298.

presupposition that the fear of Yahweh is the first principle of knowledge.<sup>50</sup> That is, Proverbs claims that the fear of Yahweh stands as the starting point for epistemology. Murphy concurs, “The oft-maligned wisdom literature is not simply secular or profane or self-centered. It is anthropological and creational, and the pertinence of the divine to these areas should be clearly evident.”<sup>51</sup> This involves a repudiating of personal autonomy for the sake of acknowledging God in all of life, including what one knows.<sup>52</sup> Ecclesiastes makes the same point, only on the other end of the epistemological spectrum. At the end of all that can be said, the fear of God must be remembered as the point of orientation.<sup>53</sup> It can also be said that Job 28:28 supports this conclusion since it comes in the middle of the book and after the cycle of speeches that leave Job and his friends at an impasse because of what they do not know.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the fear of God serves as the epistemological starting point for life.

### An Ethically Upright Life

The fear of God produces an ethically upright life. To fear God is to reject evil behavior, which implies the behavior promoted by the fear of God is ethically upright. Three lines of evidence support this assertion. First, Job 28:28 states the parallel to the fear of God is סֹרֵר מִרְעַע

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<sup>50</sup> Fuhs writes, “All human knowledge can be traced back to its divine roots. No one can be expert in the complexities of life who does not begin with the knowledge of Yahweh and dependence on him” (*TDOT*, 6:311).

<sup>51</sup> Murphy, *Proverbs*, 256.

<sup>52</sup> Blocher, “The Fear of the Lord as the ‘Principle’ of Wisdom,” 18. Blocher draws this conclusion based upon Proverbs 3:5–7. He writes, “The principle of wisdom is the renouncing of autonomy, and trusting acknowledgement of the LORD at every step of one’s practical or intellectual progress. Thus understood, the saying explains the emphasis on wisdom as a gift of God, something coming from him ....”

<sup>53</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 176–77.

<sup>54</sup> Alden, *Job*, 276.

(“to turn away from evil”). “Shunning evil”<sup>55</sup> is the equivalent to the fear of God. As noted above, this is how Job was described (1:1). Furthermore, Job’s characteristic mindset and actions are summarized in how he deals with his children (1:5).<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the fear of God served as the motivating factor for the ethically upright life that he sought to live. Second, the speech of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8 includes a description of the fear of Yahweh in ethical terms (8:13). The fear of Yahweh is equated with an aversion to evil (יִרְאַת יְהוָה שְׁנֵאת רָע).<sup>57</sup> This statement is comparable to Job 28:28 in that the fear of God is associated with an ethical response to malevolent conduct.<sup>58</sup> Third, Proverbs 16:6 is similar in its statement that the fear of God has ethical ramifications. By way of a  $\text{א}$  preposition, the fear of Yahweh is set as the means or instrument for departing from moral evil.<sup>59</sup> Thus, fearing God is set forth as the impetus for upright ethical behavior.

Taken together, the meaning of the fear of God may be synthesized along three lines. Foundationally, it is an emotional response toward God. It also serves as the epistemological

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<sup>55</sup> Alden, 277.

<sup>56</sup> Clines writes, “Reference to his children and possessions, however, functions not as a decorative addition to the portrayal of the man, but as tangible evidence of his uprightness. The fundamental assertion of Job’s blamelessness is reverted to in the last two verses of this unit, where a cameo scene depicts how scrupulous he is to ensure that his innocence extends beyond himself to the members of his family” (*Job 1–20*, 9).

<sup>57</sup> Lipiński writes, “The vb. ... refers to an emotional condition of aversion ...” (*TDOT*, 14:164). In the rest of Proverbs 8:13, wisdom announces its hatred for “arrogance and pride” (גָּאֹהַ וְנִצְנִיץ), “the evil way” (דְּרֹךְ רָע), and perverted mouths (פִּי תִהְפְּכוֹת).

<sup>58</sup> Waltke recognizes that Proverbs 8:13 is “similar in thought to Job 28:28; Prov 3:17; 16:6,” although “not a gloss from them.” See *Proverbs 1–15*, 401.

<sup>59</sup> Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), §4.1.5(c). N.B. this is set in parallel to a statement that emphasizes the character of a person who offers a sacrifice in the Levitical system. Waltke writes, “The epigrammatic proverb points only to the human virtues that complement the sacrificial system to make atonement (cf. Lev 1:4; 4:4; 16:21 *passim*). Unless a person is characterized by unflinching love, the sacrificial system is of no avail (1 Sam 15:22)” (*The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005], 13).



starting point of God’s revelation. This includes informing people on how life ought to be lived wisely in light of that revelation. Finally, the fear of God produces an ethically upright life. To fear God is to turn away from evil conduct, which implies that the life promoted by the fear of God is upright.

### **Revelation as the Link between the Fear of God and Wisdom**

Thus far, the meaning of the fear of God has been analyzed in terms of how it may be distinguished within Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and how it may be synthesized. However, the fear of God is also tied to the discipline of wisdom (Job 28:28; Prov 1:7; 9:10; cf. Eccl 8:12).<sup>60</sup> Wisdom may be generally described as a commonsense ability to connect responsible decision making to various circumstances in life.<sup>61</sup> As has been seen in the various texts above, wisdom is also connected to upright behavior via the fear of God (Job 28:28; Prov 16:16). Furthermore, the fear of God is the principle starting point for knowledge and wisdom. Hence, there is an intimate relationship between the fear of God and wisdom.

If the fear of God is the necessary starting point of wisdom, and if wisdom is the commonsense ability to connect responsible decision making to the circumstances of life, then the link between them is God’s revelation. This is true based on three observations from what

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<sup>60</sup> On the connection between wisdom and the fear of God in Ecclesiastes 8:12, which is part of the life faith in the face of moral evil, see Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 139–40. In sum, “[The fear of God] is part of [the Preacher’s] summary of the requirements of wisdom (12:13).”

<sup>61</sup> Blocher defines wisdom as “skill, expertise, or competence” (“The Fear of the Lord as the ‘Principle’ of Wisdom,” 10–11). Waltke follows various lexicons and commentators in glossing wisdom as “masterful understanding,” “skill,” and “expertise” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 76). Waltke continues, “The possession of wisdom enables humans to cope with life and to achieve what would otherwise be impossible” (76–77).

has already been discussed in this paper. In their own ways, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes have each appealed to God's revelation as the basis for wisdom.<sup>62</sup>

In Job 28, despite all his capacities and resources, man is found to be at a loss regarding where to find wisdom (28:12–22). Only God knows where wisdom may be found because of His sovereign use of it at creation (vv. 23–27). However, God has made known to man where wisdom is to be found. It is found in fearing Him (v. 28). As noted in the exegesis of verse 28, the statement is set apart from the rest of the poem as an emphatic point and as pointing outside itself.<sup>63</sup> By implication, the fear of God and wisdom work together to point to God's special revelation.

The same holds true for Proverbs. In 2:6 there is an illuminating claim made about wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. It says Yahweh gives wisdom (בְּיִיְהוָה יִתֵּן הַחֵכְמָה) and that knowledge and understanding come from His mouth (מִפִּי דַעַת וּתְבוּנָה). This imagery prompts an association to God's revelation as the starting point for knowledge and wisdom.<sup>64</sup>

However, there is also a reciprocating relationship between the fear of God and wisdom.<sup>65</sup>

Verses 1–5 call on the son of Solomon (cf. 1:1) to receive the teaching and commandments and

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<sup>62</sup> Waltke recognizes this connection via the fear of Yahweh's parallel status to other terms for God's spoken and written revelation in Psalm 19:7–9. Relative to Proverbs, he concludes by connecting the fear of God to special revelation (*Proverbs 1–15*, 100–01).

<sup>63</sup> Clines, *Job 21–37*, 923.

<sup>64</sup> Based on Prov 2:6, Kidner contends, "Discovery and revelation are inseparable" (*Proverbs*, 59). Blocher agrees, writing, "The saying [in Prov 3:5–7] explains the emphasis on wisdom as a gift of God, something coming from him, as in Solomon's case, and according to Proverbs 2:6. One can even go one step further and speak, with Kidner, of a dependence on *revelation*" ("The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom," 18, emphasis in original).

<sup>65</sup> Waltke summarizes, "The reception of wisdom and the quest for it lead to the consequence of knowing God and acquiring the fear of the Lord, the disposition necessary for internalizing the book's content" (*Proverbs 1–15*, 222).

to be predisposed (v. 2 נטה)<sup>66</sup> toward wisdom. In turn, this leads to understanding the fear of Yahweh (v. 5). That is, Yahweh gives wisdom to those who are guided by wisdom.<sup>67</sup> This is the reason that the son should listen to the wisdom of his father.<sup>68</sup>

A similar point is made in the summarizing conclusion of Ecclesiastes.<sup>69</sup> The end of the matter in the book is that God should be feared and His commandments should be kept in view of His coming judgment (12:13–14). Several scholars have recognized that there are many verbal and thematic allusions between Genesis 1–3 and Ecclesiastes.<sup>70</sup> On its own, that would be sufficient evidence to establish why the book would end this way since the first couple failed to heed God’s lone command, thus exposing them and their descendants to the consequences of sin and the frustrations of life (Gen 3:1–19). However, appeals may also be made to discussions in Ecclesiastes about wisdom and folly (Eccl 2:12–14a; 7:1–12, 19; 10:1–7), wisdom in relation to the plan of God in every circumstance in the world (3:11; 7:13–14, 23–26), and the final appeal

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<sup>66</sup> Author’s translation. The lexicons provide the glosses “guide” and “incline” (Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 1994]; *DCH*, s.v נטה).

<sup>67</sup> Kidner clarifies the point: “Yet the search, strenuous as it must be, is not unguided. Its starting-point is revelation—specific (*words*) and practical (*commandments*); its method is not one of free speculation, but of treasuring and exploring received teachings so as to penetrate to their principles (see the verbs of 1–5); and its goal, far from being academic, is spiritual: *the fear of the Lord ... the knowledge of God* (5)” (*Proverbs*, 59, emphasis in original).

<sup>68</sup> Waltke’s comments on the overall structure of Prov 2:1–12 demonstrates agreement: “The first half pertains to the *development* or production of the son’s character. By internalizing parental teaching (vv. 1–4) he will come to fear and know God (vv. 5–8) and to learn righteousness intuitively (vv. 9–11)” (*Proverbs 1–15*, 216, emphasis in original).

<sup>69</sup> The following paragraph draws from Noah Hartmetz, “Ecclesiastes, the Doctrine of Revelation, and ‘A Man and His Ba’: A Comparison Paper” (OT 868 Exegesis of Wisdom Literature, Sun Valley, CA, 2023), 9–10, 11–13.

<sup>70</sup> David M. Clemens, “The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3,” *Themelios* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5–8; Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 36–37; Robert V. McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (1996): 95; Carl H. Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 1 (1974): 61–62; Matthew Seufert, “The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 1 (2016): 80–90.

to God's revelation as the necessary answer to the conundrums presented in the book.<sup>71</sup> As Katharine J. Dell argues, this is central to accomplishing the wisdom task.<sup>72</sup> Instead of reflecting "distinct voices"<sup>73</sup> or a lack of trust in God's goodness,<sup>74</sup> Ecclesiastes explores and exposes the benefits and limitations of wisdom so that his readers would follow through to the conclusion drawn in 12:13–14.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, in their own unique ways, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes connect wisdom to the fear of God via the bridge of the revelation of God. Job demonstrates that God's word is necessary for finding wisdom and for knowing it is equivalent to the fear of God (28:28). Proverbs appeals to the revelation of God in similar ways, specifying that it is from the mouth of God that wisdom comes (2:6), which in turn draws its principle starting point from the fear of God (1:7; 9:10). Ecclesiastes ends with an explicit link between the fear of God and God's word

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<sup>71</sup> Katharine J. Dell writes, "At times wisdom seems to be his presupposition, his strength, and his benchmark for judging everything, at other time [*sic*] he sees its limitations and its relativity in the light of divine unpredictability and death" ("A Wise Man Reflecting on Wisdom: Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes," *Tyndale Bulletin* 71, no. 1 [2020]: 138).

<sup>72</sup> Dell, 147. Furthermore, she writes, "Qoheleth uses the method of 'weighing' up proverbs and providing an interpretation of them. This suggests that differing opinions, such as is often found when putting one proverb against another, is at the heart of this wise man's teaching, as it would have been for his predecessors in circles of 'the wise'" (139).

<sup>73</sup> So David Penchansky, *Understanding Wisdom Literature: Conflict and Dissonance in the Hebrew Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 50–51. Penchansky introduces his comments on Ecclesiastes by writing, "Everyone tries to make sense of the book of Ecclesiastes. Its interpretive difficulties derive from its three distinct voices. Each voice has its own perspective and its own unique theology" (50).

<sup>74</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, Third Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 127, 129. Crenshaw summarizes the message of Ecclesiastes as the bankruptcy of wisdom since "nothing proved that God looked on creatures with favor." Therefore, the question must be asked, "Does life have any meaning at all?" (127). However, rather than a decidedly pessimistic view of life, Ecclesiastes exposes the folly of living as if God has nothing to do with life or that life must be fully understood in order to be enjoyed. That is, when life is lived under the sovereign and providential hand of God, it can be enjoyed and be full of meaning (Eccl 3:11–13; 5:1–3; 11:9–10).

<sup>75</sup> See McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," 100. He writes, "[Qohelet] takes us down the path of wisdom ... [and] pleasure but this also leads to a dead end. We are taken down various dead end trails until finally we come to 'the conclusion of the matter' in 12:13, and he informs us that the answer to his quest is fearing God and keeping his commandments."

contained in His commandments, which is where wisdom must humbly go after it has exhausted all its resources in understanding the perplexities and injustices of life (12:13–14). The revelation of God is the necessary connection between a right response to God and wise, upright living before God. Wise men fear God because God has revealed Himself to them.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the fear of God is an emotional response to God that serves as the starting point for ethics, epistemology, and the end point for a life full of unknowns. Each of these elements are drawn from the distinctive contributions of the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. In Job, the fear of God is the ethical starting point for life. In Proverbs, the fear of God is the epistemological starting point for man's exercise of wisdom in the world. In Ecclesiastes, the fear of God is the end point for considering the enigmas and frustrations of life in a world under God's curse. Foundational to each is the nature of God and the certainty of His judgment. Because of this reality, men should fear Him. Finally, consistent with each element is the reliance upon God's revelation in the Scriptures as the necessary link between the fear of God and the need for wise living in the world. Whether it be a theory of knowledge, ethics, or the realization that neither of these are sufficient to account for all the perplexities of life, the constant is the fear of God in accord with how He has made Himself known. Thus, the wisdom literature of the Bible is necessary and in need of continual study and reflection.

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