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The Term "Fear of God" in the Old Testament

(A Linguistic Study)

By H. O. A. KEINATH

The words "fear," "fearful," "fearfulness," occur rather frequently in the Bible. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that each "fear" of the King James Version is a translation of the same Hebrew word. In the Old Testament we find that no less than seventeen Hebrew words of different roots are at some time or other rendered by "fear," "fearfulness," etc., in the Authorized Version. Some of the more common Hebrew words for fear are **יִרְאַה**, **פָּחַד**, **יִרְאָה**, **מָנוּר**.

In this study attention will be limited to those cases in which God is named as the source or the object of fear, that is, expressions such as "fear of God," "fear of the Lord," "fearing God," "My (God's) fear," etc., where these words are based on the Hebrew **יָרָא** and other words having the same root. Other Hebrew expressions for fear of God, e. g., **אִי־מָה**, will be treated only in so far as they furnish a comparison with the concept **יָרָא יְהוָה**. This latter term, then, will be given the chief consideration.

The word **יָרָא**, and other forms of the root **יָרָא**, when used without any further modification, is a common expression for all kinds of fears. It is used for the fear a man has over against a superior (Josh. 4:14), for the fear of father and mother (Lev. 19:3), fear of public opinion (1 Sam. 15:24), fear of an invading army (Josh. 10:2), fear of a possible danger (Gen. 19:30), fear of an opponent (2 Sam. 3:11), and other objects. This word appears regularly in the familiar **אֱלֹהֵי יָרָא**.

But **יָרָא** takes on a more specific meaning when it has the name of God as the object, that is, in expressions such as these:

יָרָא יְהוָה, **יָרָא יְהוָה**, **יָרָא יְהוָה**, **יָרָא יְהוָה**, **יָרָא יְהוָה**.

A careful study reveals that such fear (**יָרָא**) of God is not ascribed to everybody, but only to a distinct class of people. A number of cases will serve to establish this significant truth. Abraham was a man of whom God Himself said that he feared

God (Gen. 22:12). Obadiah, the man who protected the Lord's prophets while Ahab and Jezebel were persecuting them, said: "I, thy servant, fear the Lord from my youth" (1 Kings 18:12). By the mouth of His Prophet Jeremiah the Lord says of those who shall be His people: "I will put My fear in their hearts that they shall not depart from Me" (Jer. 32:40). The midwives of the Israelites in Egypt, who refused to carry out the murderous command of Pharaoh, are described as those who feared God (Ex. 1:17). Job is pictured as the man who was perfect and upright and one that feared God (Job 1:1). Joseph, in dealing with his brothers, assures them that he fears God (Gen. 42:18). Israel is distinguished from all the people of the earth by having the fear of God (1 Kings 8:43). "The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him, that hope in His mercy" (Ps. 33:18). They that fear the Lord are the same as those who are the objects of His mercy (Ps. 103:11, 17), His pity (Ps. 103:13), His blessing (Pss. 115:13; 112:1). His angel camps round about them that fear Him (Ps. 34:7); He takes pleasure in them (Ps. 147:11). The Psalmists frequently express their delight in having this fear: "Stablish Thy Word unto Thy servant, who is devoted to Thy fear" (Ps. 119:38); "In Thy fear will I worship" (Ps. 5:7). Even the coming Messiah is described as having this fear, for the Spirit of the Lord shall make Him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord (Is. 11:3). It is to be noted again that in all these cases this fear is a *fear of God* expressed in the original by *יָרָא* and regularly is an attitude ascribed *only to a child of God*.

Conversely, those who are not children of God are frequently described as lacking this fear. Pharaoh is one who does not have the fear of God (Ex. 9:30). Some of the foreigners settled in Israel after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, who were plagued by the lions among them, were such as feared not the Lord (2 Kings 17:25). In the antithetic parallelism of Prov. 10:27: "The fear of the Lord prolongeth days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened," the wicked is the opposite of one who fears the Lord. They who have not the fear of the Lord are those who hate knowledge (Prov. 1:29). The Amalekites, who attempted to block the exodus of Israel, are described as those who feared not God (Deut. 25:18). When Abraham came to the heathen land

of Philistia, he assumed that the fear of the Lord was not in the place (Gen. 20:11). The sorcerers, adulterers, false swearers, and oppressors are summarily described as those that fear not the Lord (Mal. 3:5). Lack of the fear (יִרְאָה) of God, then, is regularly the characteristic of the heathen, the ungodly, the gross sinner.

A few cases appear in the Old Testament where, upon first reading, the fear (יִרְאָה) of the Lord seems to be attributed also to such as are plainly not children of God. These occur in 2 Kings 17:24-41, where the mixed worship of the Samaritans after the Assyrian captivity is described. There we read such expressions as these ("fear" always being a translation of יִרְאָה in these cases): A priest "taught them how they should fear the Lord" (v. 28); "they feared the Lord, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them priests of the high places" (v. 32); "they feared the Lord and served their own gods" (v. 33); "so these nations feared the Lord and served their graven images" (v. 41). This seems to say that the people had the fear of the Lord while at the same time sacrificing to false gods and generally practicing various forms of idolatry. But it should be noted that this does not refer to *individuals*, but to *nations*, (vv. 26, 30, 31, 41). In these nations there were individuals who truly feared the Lord and also those who practiced idolatry, and the writer of Kings is simply describing this mixed worship.

In some instances, however, the term "fear of God" in our King James Version is a translation of a Hebrew word other than יִרְאָה, and in such cases "fear" may have implications quite different from יִרְאָה. One of these is פָּחַד, both in its noun and in its verb forms. This fear is ascribed to heathen kingdoms who had seen the victories of Judah under King Jehoshaphath: "The fear of God was on all the kingdoms of those countries when they heard that the Lord fought against the enemies of Israel" (2 Chron. 20:29). Similarly, in 2 Chron. 17:10, this fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah. When King Saul issued his first call for the armed forces to gather, he sent dissected oxen throughout the land as a means of threatening would-be slackers. Then "the fear of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out with one consent" (1 Sam. 11:7). Isaiah threat-

ens backsliding Israel: "Hide thee in the dust for fear of the Lord" (Is. 2:10), and thus urges the same fear which prevented foreign nations from attacking Israel. It is evident that פחד has the implication of "terror," which prevents an outburst of wickedness or urges a proper deed by the threat of evil consequences. It is a fear which the heathen and gross sinner may have, though he maintains an attitude of enmity towards God.

Some passages of the Bible in which פחד occurs receive added significance from this analysis of "fear": Job warns his three critical friends that God's "dread" (פחד) should keep them from evil, that is, a fear which is not יראת should at least prevent an outburst of sin (Job 13:11). Similarly the Prophet Jeremiah denounces Israel in the words: "Thou hast forsaken the Lord, thy God, and . . . my fear (פחדי) is not in thee" (Jer. 2:19). This, then, is to say that not even a feeling of terror over against God has affected the nation. In such cases, not the higher motive יראת, which is the love of a child of God, is appealed to, but the more commonplace terror, which anyone may have.

אימה, usually translated by "terror" in the King James Version, is used a few times in referring to a fear of God. In these cases, also, "terror" of God would be a more appropriate translation. Thus God will send His fear (אימה) before Israel as this nation advances into the lands of the enemies (Ex. 23:27). Evidently the meaning is that God will terrify these nations, so that they will not oppose Israel.

The words ניר and ערץ to express fear of God are used in a few poetical lines but only in parallels to ירא and do not seem to have any special significance.

To return to the term "fear of God" as expressed by ירא. One characteristic connotation of this term remains to be examined. This is the implication of moral and ethical conduct which is so unmistakably connected with the terms יראת יהוה, יראת אלהים, and other expressions in which ירא is associated with the name of God. This association of fear and conduct is so common that it can safely be termed a constant, and the conclusion is warranted that this fear of God is never without moral implications. Of the very large number of instances, only a few will be listed to furnish the proof.

Job is described as a man who feared God and *eschewed evil* (Job 1:1). Abraham's obedience to the will of God proved him to be one that feared God (Gen. 22:12). Nehemiah mentions his fear of God as the motive for being considerate of his fellow men (Neh. 5:15). Moses tells Israel that the fear of God should be before the nation "that ye sin not" (Ex. 20:20). Because the Israelite midwives feared God, they refused to kill the children (Ex. 1:17). Ye shall walk after the Lord, your God, and fear Him, and keep His commandments, and obey His voice (Deut. 13:4). The Book of Proverbs rather frequently refers to the close connection between this fear and conduct: "Fear the Lord, and depart from evil" (Prov. 3:7); "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil" (Prov. 8:13); "By the fear of the Lord men depart from evil" (Prov. 16:6); "He that walketh in his uprightness feareth the Lord" (Prov. 14:2). The fear of the Lord is to control men in the everyday conduct of life: "Take thou no usury of him, or increase; but fear thy God, that thy brother may live with thee" (Lev. 25:36).

A fear of God which is expressed by Hebrew terms other than יָרָא may result in terror (2 Chron. 20:29; Is. 2:10; 2 Chron. 17:10; 2 Chron. 14:14, where פָּחַד is used), but not in really God-pleasing conduct.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of this analysis the following conclusions are warranted:

1. When "fear of God" is ascribed to a person, such fear being expressed by יָרָא , then this is consistently an attitude which *only a child of God* can have.
2. Non-Christians may have a fear of God, but such fear is expressed by terms other than יָרָא .
3. "Fear of God," if expressed by יָרָא and a name of God, is an attitude which connotes *godly conduct*.

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