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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

Φόβος, ROM. 3:18

The words "There is no fear of God before their eyes" in this passage are a quotation from Ps. 36:1. Since fears are within us (2 Cor. 7:5), we raise the question: Can anyone in good English, Greek, or Hebrew speak of fear as being before the eyes? There is a blind spot in the commentaries on that point. For some time I thought the difficulty had to be solved by taking "before the eyes" to mean "I am conscious of" or "I feel." But Biblical usage is against that interpretation; it speaks of that which is extraneous to a person as being before his eyes: Psalm 18:24 (= 2 Sam. 22:25) speaks of David as being before the eyes of God; Psalm 5:5, of boasters before God; Psalm 101:7, of a liar before the Psalmist; Job 4:16, of a spirit before Eliphaz; Psalm 101:3, of a wicked thing which the Psalmist hates. The closest parallel is found in Psalm 26:3, where David says to the Lord, "Your kindness is before my eyes." Like this "kindness," the "fear of God" is something in God, and so it is "before the eyes" of man. That is why Brown-Driver-Briggs under *nagadb* say of Psalm 36:1 (this is the only direct support that I found): "He has no eye to discern God's awe-inspiring judgments."

We have been misled by the exclusively subjective meaning of the English word "fear." The Hebrew *pachadb* frequently means, not a feeling in the subject, but a frightening feature of the night (Ps. 91:5), of an enemy (Ps. 64:1), or of God who is angry with sin (Ps. 119:120); in this last case it is almost equivalent to φόβη (Rom. 3:5). While the word "fear" should in such instances be replaced by a word like "terror" or "threat," I am retaining "fear" in the following passages in order to show how the context overrules the erroneous subjective element in our word "fear": "Don't be afraid of sudden *fear*" (Prov. 3:25); "hide from the *fear* of the Lord" (Is. 2:10; see also vv. 19, 21); "he who flees from the noise of the *fear* will fall into the pit" (Is. 24:18). (See also Job 3:25; 15:21; 22:10; Ps. 31:11; Jer. 48:44.) It is clear, then, that φόβος in the Septuagint rendering of Psalm 36:1 is not "awe, reverence," as Liddell & Scott assert; by the "fear of God" the Psalmist means a terrifying God whom the sinner fails to keep before his eyes.

When Paul quotes Ps. 36:1 in Rom. 3:18, he embodies the unaltered meaning of the Psalm in his letter. The genitive θεοῦ, which

Robertson (*Grammar*, p. 500) and Bauer (under φόβος) call objective, is subjective. Paul says to the world of Jews and Greeks (Rom. 3:9) that "God does not terrify them." The world, then and now, is closing its eyes to the God of Sinai, who is a consuming fire.

While the English word "fear" is incorrect, the Septuagint and Paul were within classical usage when they used φόβος for the "terror" of God. Liddell & Scott give instances from Sophocles, Herodotus, and Xenophon where the term means just that. A papyrus of 307—6 B. C. (Moulton and Milligan) seems to speak of "fears surrounding the Greeks." Φόβερος, used of horses or enemies, means "causing fear." Athena is called φοβειστράτη, the scarer of armies. The simple verb φοβέω is used of camels frightening horses. It is significant that the New Testament uses only the passive, φοβέομαι, with the meaning "fear," as if it meant "to be frightened by a φόβος."

Where else in the New Testament does φόβος have this meaning? Obviously in Rom. 13:3 (Abbott-Smith are probably mistaken when they call this a case of metonymy). Also definitely in 2 Cor. 5:11 when we consider the background of judgment presented in v. 10. Φόβος may also have this meaning in Heb. 2:15, where "terror" as something inherent in death and not merely our "fear" of death makes us slaves (for evidence that points to this meaning see especially Ps. 55:4; Hos. 13:14; also 2 Sam. 22:5-6; Ps. 18:4-5; 116:3; Prov. 13:14; 14:27). This meaning of φόβος also fits the phrase in 1 John 4:18, ὁ φόβος κόλασιν ἔχει; but if that is the meaning, verses 17-18 will have a different cast.

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