

The Fear of the Lord and the Politics of Awe

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It is common practice in many churches to share the “passing of the peace” during worship. But what if someone next to you passed something different by saying “May the fear of the Lord be with you.” How would you respond? Perhaps move to another pew? Or imagine seeing on a course syllabus in theology the stated goal “to fear the Lord.” I would drop the course.

From surging Covid variants, worsening climate disruption, and rising crime to domestic terrorism, rampant xenophobia, and racist aggression, many of us live under a dark cloud of fear. Some fears are valid; others are not. It has been said that 90% of our fears do not reflect reality, but I wonder whether this observation needs some significant updating.¹ There are today plenty of good reasons to be afraid, and fear is a natural response to the world as we see it.² In any case, much of what we do is driven by fear, whether it’s electing leaders, practicing on the shooting range, or walking guardedly on the sidewalk.

But the biblical sages and psalmists identified another, entirely different, kind of fear, the “fear of the Lord,” which has nothing to do with spreading terror and all to do with promoting confidence, wisdom, and livelihood. Note these references to “fear” in Proverbs:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. (Prov 1:7a)

The fear of the Lord prolongs life. (Prov 10:27a)

In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence. (Prov 14:26a)

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life. (Prov 14:27a)³

This kind of “fear” builds confidence and “prolongs life,” far different from the kind that elicits the “fight, flight, or freeze” response that, if sustained, debilitates the body. “The fear of the Lord” must mean something starkly different from “the spirit of cowardice” to which Paul refers in 2 Tim 1:7. For the biblical sages, “the fear of the Lord” is enlivening and enlightening. From Psalm 111:10 comes the oft-quoted line “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (cf. Prov 1:7; 9:10). In the psalm, God is praised for doing “great works” and “wonderful deeds,” for providing food, for keeping covenant, for doing justice, for redeeming people, for being gracious and merciful. Those are the reasons for “fearing the Lord,” and such “fear” is expressed in praise, delight, and obedience. “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them” (Ps 111:2). For the sages, wisdom was none other than “fear seeking understanding” (with apologies to Anselm) or “inquisitive awe.”⁴

The biblical sages insisted that the “fear of the Lord” draws one closer to God, living out the ways of God’s wisdom, rather than compels one to flee and hide from God’s presence (cf. Gen 3:8). In a word, such “fear” is *affiliative*, which seems absurd when we think of fear only as an avoidance response. Moreover, what kind of fear can be claimed as the “beginning of wisdom”? How does a God who is “gracious and merciful” and a provider of food inspire “fear”? This is not fear in any conventional

sense. It is not a paralyzing terror, but a grateful fear, a source of joy and delight (Sirach 1:11-20). Such “fear,” I submit, is akin to awe and wonder. As Abraham Heschel put it, “Unlike fear, [awe] does not make us shrink from the awe-inspiring object, but on the contrary draws us near to it.”⁵

This strange kind of fear cannot be fully captured in English translation. “Reverence” by itself only dilutes the kind of “fear” that is commended by the psalmist and the sage. I propose reverential “awe” as the best candidate. Awe “stops us in our tracks,” arrests us in our routines, and shatters our “illusion of control and omnipotence,” while at the same time arousing a desire to venture forth in a new direction in wonder.⁶ Awe awakens wonder, and wonder overcomes fear. In awe and wonder, a new attentiveness is born, a freshness of perception that “imbues the world with a certain ‘luring’ quality.”⁷ As Martha Nussbaum puts it, “In wonder I want to leap or run, in awe to kneel.”⁸ And most often “running” in wonder begins with “kneeling” in awe. If awe is the beginning of wonder, then wonder is the beginning of wisdom. Just ask Socrates: “Wonder (*to thaumazein*) is the only beginning of philosophy” (*Theaetetus* 155d). The analogy is unmistakable: as philosophy is to wisdom, so “the fear of the Lord” is to wonder.

Awe is prompted by something or someone considered quintessentially *Other*, wholly outside of us yet striking a resonant chord deep within us. Whether in beauty or in ugliness, an experience of awe comes unbidden, both as a disruption and as a gift. As the outcome of awe, wonder is a paradox. On the one hand, it instills a reverent, even fearful, receptivity toward the other, a posture of standing back or bending the knee. Such is wonder’s affinity with awe. On the other hand, wonder quickens the desire to venture forth toward the source or object of awe and wonder. As awe kindles wonder, so wonder kindles the “*eros* of inquiry,”⁹ the desire toward knowledge and wisdom. Wonder cultivates an emotional and cognitive openness that is genuinely receptive yet ever restless. Such are the two sides of wonder: awe and inquiry. Or cast in biblical terms: the “fear of the Lord” and “wisdom.”

The Science of Awe

If the “fear of the Lord” is the biblical counterpart to awe, how do they mirror each other? What do they share in common? Here, science may be of help. Research psychologists define “awe” as an emotion located “in the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear.”¹⁰ Put more technically by researcher Paul Piff, awe is “an emotional response to perceptually vast stimuli that defy one’s accustomed frame of reference in some domain. People typically experience awe in response to asocial stimuli like natural wonders, panoramic views, and beautiful art.”¹¹ Or God. The point is that awe defies and deconstructs our accustomed worldviews. It “arises via appraisals of stimuli that are *vast*, that *transcend current frames of reference*, and that require *new schemata* to accommodate what is being perceived.”¹² All experiences of awe have in common the perception of “vastness,” whether in size or in complexity, that “dramatically expands the observer’s usual frame of reference in some dimension or domain” and at the same time results in a self-perception researchers describe as the “small self,” a sense that one’s individual being and goals are relatively insignificant in comparison to something much larger.¹³

Piff and others undertook a series of studies to determine the behavioral consequences of awe, in particular whether awe produces “prosocial behavior” such

as generosity and altruism. Awe was elicited in a variety of ways: the recollection of a natural scene, viewing videos of nature-based imagery including scenic vistas, mountains, plains, forests, and canyons, viewing nonnature-based awe conditions such as “droplets of colored water colliding with a bowl of milk,”¹⁴ as well as viewing a video montage of threatening natural phenomena, such as tornados and volcanoes.

In measuring the outcomes of “prosocial behavior,” the researchers found no appreciable difference among the various conditions of awe presented to their subjects in eliciting their self-perception as a “small self.” Moreover, the non-nature-based condition for eliciting awe demonstrated that “vastness” could be measured not only by physical size but also by “complexity.” The researchers suggested that awe “can be aroused by entities both large and small (e.g., those vast in complexity).”¹⁵ To sum up, the two central features of awe are (1) an experience of “vastness,” which elicits a diminution of the self while “transcend[ing] current frames of reference,” and (2) the construction of “new schemata to accommodate what is being perceived.”¹⁶ Or, put more simply: disorienting vastness and reorientation. It almost sounds psalmic (thanks to Walter Brueggemann)!¹⁷

Job in Awe

As I have argued elsewhere in greater detail,¹⁸ both dimensions of awe apply well to God’s answer to Job in chapters 38-41 of the book. As Job himself declares in response, “Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3). Job admits to having spoken out of ignorance of the “wonderful things” (*nīplā’ōt*) he has been shown by God, whose revelation of creation exposed what Job “did not understand” and required a new orientation toward the world and himself.

Vastness of Creation

God provides Job a poetic panorama of creation, one that extends far beyond Job’s own purview. The poetry revels in the language of vastness as it takes Job from the “pathway to where light dwells” (38:19) to the “gates of deep darkness” (v. 17) and “recesses of the deep” (v. 16), from the “storehouses” of snow and hail (v. 22) to the “expanse of the earth” (v. 18). God asks Job whether he can “bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion” (v. 31). Moreover, God points out the “waste and desolate land,” remote from human contact, where channels of rainwater irrigate the desert yielding new life (vv. 25-27). Such domains testify, in Job’s earlier words, to the very “outskirts of [the Lord’s] ways” (26:14), now brought front and center to his attention. The world according to God is so vast that it swallows Job up and scales him down. Job’s self-confessed result is his sense of “small self.” When challenged to respond by God, Job could only say:

Look, I am so insignificant (*qallōtī*);
what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, I will not do it again. 40:4–5

Job’s self-professed silence, complete with appropriate hand gesture, not only

acknowledges God's superior might but also signals Job's state of awe. The vastness of creation has made its mark: Job considers himself insignificant. But this is only the first step.

Job's Reorientation

Beyond impressing upon Job a sense of creation's vastness and overwhelming divine power, God in fact teaches Job a thing or two about creation, transforming Job's awe into wonder and wisdom. Job experiences a radical shift in perspective as he comes to see creation from God's vantagepoint, particularly in the first part of God's answer in which Job witnesses the expanse of the cosmos (38:4–38). But there is more. When God enlists the creatures of the wild for Job's consideration, from lions to Leviathan, God compels Job to see the world through *their* eyes (38:39–39:30; 40:15–24; 41:1–34). Job sees the looming battle through the eyes of the warhorse, spies out corpses on the battlefield through the eyes of the vulture, roars for prey as the lion, cries for food like the raven's brood, roams free on the vast plains like the onager, laughs at fear like the ostrich, plays in the mountains like Behemoth, and romps fiercely in the ocean like Leviathan. In God's eyes, such creatures are all subjects unto themselves, many of whom view the wilderness not as chaos but as home. The onager, for example, looks to the city and sees only chaos and oppression while dwelling quite happily in the salt lands and mountains (39:6–8). Job, as a result, is taken into the perceptual worlds of these wild creatures, reversing his own.

Perhaps most dissonant for Job is God's validation of chaos in creation. The overall movement of God's revelatory answer proceeds from creation to chaos, from the earth's foundations to Leviathan, rather than the reverse, as is typical of ancient creation accounts.¹⁹ The monstrous figure of Leviathan marks the culmination of creation, not creation's catastrophe. In God's world, this denizen of the deep is not slated for destruction but rather is meant to thrive, assuming unrivalled royal status (41:34; cf. 40:11–12). It is Leviathan, not Job, much less humanity, who bears royal status (cf. 29:25; Gen 1:26–28). All in all, God's reconstruction of creation is not just an exercise in cognitive dissonance but an experience of "cognitive crucifixion." In God's answer to Job, "shift happens." How does Job handle this? Enter the epilogue.

In the book's concluding narrative (Job 42:7–17), awe is proven to have its own moral outcome, now that Job is back home fully restored. The moral impact of awe directs the reader's attention not to Job's new life *per se*, restored as it is, but to Job's new *way* of life, as revealed by one single yet telling act on his part. With the same number of children as before (see 1:2), Job the patriarch commits the unprecedented act of sharing his inheritance with his three daughters (42:13–15). In biblical antiquity, the family's wealth was typically passed on only to the sons, while the daughters had to marry outside the family as a matter of economic survival. But not in Job's household. Job cares about the dignity and economic well-being of all his children, daughters and sons alike, much like God's care for all the creatures of the wild. And perhaps it is because for the first time Job is able to see the world through his daughters' eyes. Perhaps out of empathy Job comes to realize the struggles that his daughters face in a world dominated by men. In any case, Job upends patriarchal convention as much as God upended Job's world. Job's "prosocial behavior" served the cause of justice, specifically gender justice. Such is one biblical example of the "politics of awe."

Politics of Awe

I refer to another, albeit very different, example of biblical awe (aka “fear of the Lord”), one in which such awe is ritualized and communalized, as found in the tithe-meal stipulations given in Deuteronomy 14, divided into three sections:²⁰

Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may *learn to fear the Lord your God always*. (vv. 22-23)

But if, when the Lord your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the Lord your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; spend the money for whatever you wish — oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together. As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you. (vv. 24-27)

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake. (vv. 28-29)

Normally in the ancient Near East, a tithe was considered a tribute given to the king or priest in charge. Here, however, the tithe is uniquely associated with a lavish feast eaten “in the presence of the Lord” by all within the household and shared with the most vulnerable, including the Levites, immigrants, orphans, and widows. Such a meal, one might say, is akin to a potluck supper that welcomed guests who had no means to contribute. Instead of giving the tithe away to God to keep, the Israelites were to share and feast on it, and to do so joyfully and inclusively. And for what reason? To “learn to fear the Lord your God always” (v. 23b), the God who proves to be supremely benevolent. Such fear is “learned” in two ways: 1) by hosting a tithe meal that is itself an exercise in awe and wonder, highlighting the generosity of God who gives back what is offered to be received in joy, and 2) by practicing a festive form of inclusion in which the most vulnerable and marginalized are included in the celebration. In mandated ritual, awe and “prosocial behavior” find their culinary convergence, and a community comes closer to embodying egalitarian justice.

This example of the “politics of awe” cultivates joy and gratitude on the one hand, and solidarity with the most vulnerable on the other. It is at the table that one participates in the “fear of the Lord” in awe and wonder, in communion and *communitas*. Indeed, the politics of awe includes justice and mercy, wisdom and hope, joy and perseverance, charity and moral responsibility. To borrow from Judaism, such awe leads to *tikkûn ‘ôlām*, to “repairing the world.” With apologies to the prophet

Micah, but fully in keeping with the spirit of his message, I revise ever so slightly one of the most well-known passages in Scripture (6:8):

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk *in awe* with your God?

Walking “in awe” involves walking “humbly,” for awe-inspired humility is the most generative kind of humility. It is the kind that empowers and enlivens, that takes the “small self” to new heights of agency on behalf of others.

“May the fear of the Lord be with you.”
“And also with you.”

Notes

1 Noted in Gareth Higgins, *How Not To Be Afraid: Seven Ways To Live When Everything Seems Terrifying* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 6.

2 Higgins, *How Not To Be Afraid*, 7.

3 All translations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the NRSV.

4 For further detail, see William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 24, 37-38.

5 Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 77.

6 Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 36.

7 Robert C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 66.

8 Martha C Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 54 n.53.

9 Jerome A. Miller, *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Post-Modern World* (Albany: SUNY, 1992), 15, 53.

10 Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion,” *Cognition and Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003), 297. For more on the biblical implications of this original study, see William P. Brown, “Wisdom’s Wonder and the Science of Awe,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and the Modern Sciences*, ed. John P. Slattery (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 39, 42.

11 Paul K. Piff, Pia Dietze, Matthew Feinberg, Daniel M. Stancato, and Dacher Keltner, “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 6 (2015), 883.

12 Piff, et al., “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” 884. Italics added.

13 Piff, et al., “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” 884, 892–93.

14 Piff, et al., “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” 891.

15 Piff, et al., “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” 893.

16 Piff, et al., “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” 884.

17 Brueggemann famously typologized many of the psalms as psalms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation/new orientation (*The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* [Augsburg Old Testament Studies; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984]).

18 Brown, “Wisdom’s Wonder and the Science of Awe,” 33-44.

19 Carol A. Newsom, “The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 597.

20 NRSV translation. The following discussion draws from Michael J. Rhodes’s insights in *Formative Feasting: Practices and Economic Ethics in Deuteronomy's Tithe Meal and the Corinthian Lord's Supper*.