Hebrew Bible and the "Fear of God"

Acknowledging the linguistic and geographical breadth of comparable terminology is a good starting point for seeing how this conception of "fear" does, and does not, overlap with the conception of "fear" that modern readers may bring to ancient texts. These terms from antiquity can and do indicate a feeling of fear. Yet they regularly go beyond feelings, and they convey a conception of feelings per se in ways that reveal taxonomical challenges.

See Also: *Facets of Fear: The Fear of God in Exilic and Post-exilic Contexts* (Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

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In a range of ways, the scribes behind the Hebrew Bible wrote of "fear" and, relatedly, "fear of God," which is a prominent thread in ancient Jewish literature. The latter motif is an outworking of the way that fear terminology is used more broadly in and beyond the Hebrew Bible. The following discussion aims to clarify some facets of fear within a small space. I will concentrate on matters pertaining to language, taxonomy, and a few anthropological profiles in which "fear" terminology is operative (for more detailed discussion and engagement with the history of research, see Lasater 2019; see further Plath 1962; Becker 1965; Derousseaux 1970). The goal is to provide readers with a sense of how this important motif is used.

The most important terms are derivatives of the root *yrʾ* (traditionally translated as "fear"). In the Hebrew Bible, "fear of god(s)" involves feeling, but extends well beyond what modern readers might call feeling as such. More fundamentally, derivatives of *yrʾ* express a certain type of relation and distinguish normatively between its members. The verb *yrʾ* does not occur in relations between equals; it occurs in relations of hierarchy. For instance, to "fear" Yhwh involves acknowledging one's lower standing before Yhwh and often taking concrete action based upon that acknowledgment. The same would apply to "fearing" a king or one's parents. We can think of *yrʾ* in terms of submitting or subordinating oneself, with

feeling and activity being inseparable. Even more, *yrʾ* may be done properly or improperly, being judged with reference to the figure to whom it is due. This brings us to the question of how to classify *yrʾ*-derivatives. Usually, we would not say that someone in fact "fears" properly or improperly, since, so the reasoning goes, emotions belong to an individual's own domain to be judged by that individual. By contrast, one can fail in the doing of *yrʾ*, since it is part of a normative framework. In various ways, this activity is one that biblical literature stresses is appropriate, even crucial, for people to embody.

Terminology

The most prominent "fear" terminology in ancient Hebrew are the forms of *yrʾ*, which are followed numerically by *pḥd*; *ʿrṣ*; *ḥtt*; and more. Noteworthy among the neighboring, Northwest Semitic dialects are the semantically parallel *plḥ* and *dhl* (Aramaic), as well as some attestations of the root *yrʾ* (Ugaritic, KTU 1.6 VI, 30f.; and 1.5 II, 6f.). One should also note the East Semitic parallel *palāḫu* (Akkadian). Such terms display an ancient Near Eastern conception of "fear" that can articulate feeling, activity, and positioning, a pattern of usage with further parallels in Greek terms like *phobeō*/*phobeomai*. Acknowledging the linguistic and geographical breadth of comparable terminology is a good starting point for seeing how this conception of "fear" does, and does not, overlap with the conception of "fear" that modern readers may bring to ancient texts. These terms from antiquity can and do indicate a feeling of fear. Yet they regularly go beyond feelings, and they convey a conception of feelings *per se* in ways that reveal taxonomical challenges. Before we examine fear in ancient Jewish contexts, these taxonomical issues should be addressed.

Taxonomy

How should we classify the terms listed above? Taking as our focus the Hebrew root *yrʾ* and its derivatives (e.g., the nominal form *yirʾāh*; the participial form *nôrāʾ*; etc.), *yrʾ* can indicate a feeling, as well as an activity—and the activity can be normative, something that may be intentionally learned, carried out, and assessed by others as proper or improper. In texts like Prov 1:7; 2:5; and 9:10, *yrʾ* initiates an intellectual quest and marks that quest's production of heightened understanding (see also 15:33;

Job 28:28; Psa 111:10; and even though some are only available in Greek, see Sir 1:12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 27; 19:20; 25:11). Accordingly, not only matters of feeling and activity, but also matters of intellect or rationality, find expression in *yrʾ*-derivatives. While this combination of elements is fine for *interpreting* textual usages of *yrʾ*, it uncovers problems for *classifying* and *translating* it into modern languages like English, German, and so on. The attendant idea of "fear" does not align well with what many people today have in mind with "fear" as an emotion. The question here is, "Why not?"

The conceptual dissonance is historically understandable (e.g., see Dixon 2003; Lasater 2017). Studies in the history and philosophy of science have illustrated how, as a psychological category, the emotions are a relative newcomer, whose key intellectual roots are in modern Scotland. In what follows, the term "feelings" will serve as a base term to be distinguished from the specific *conceptions* of emotions, on the one hand, and passions and affections, on the other.

While the passions are rooted in ancient Greece, with a long history in and beyond Latin-speaking contexts, the emotions are rooted in the modern Humean tradition, among consciously revisionist, anti-Aristotelian figures. Committed to a theoretical analogy between psychology and the Newtonian physics of matter, David Hume (1711–1776) is among the earliest documented figures to use "emotion" as a psychological category. In Book 2 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738), he inconsistently references the "emotions" alongside the much older category of the "passions," sometimes equating them and sometimes contrasting them. Traditionally, the passions belonged to discussions of the soul, which involved the human intellect and will, each of which interacted with passions in complex ways. Indeed, passions were movements of the soul and could be beneficial or harmful, good or bad, orderly or disorderly, depending on how their relationship to human knowing and desiring inclined someone toward or away from the good. As one aspect of the soul's dynamics, passions needed to be guided, but not eliminated, through rationality. The passions were at home in the context of ethics. By contrast, Hume separated emotions from the faculties of intellect and will. Where there is a relationship to reason in his theory, reason is subordinate to emotions/passions, being their useful "slave." Not being a phenomenon of the soul in Hume's conception of human beings, emotions became deterministic, autonomous entities.

Even more consequential was the philosophical psychologist Thomas Brown (1778–1820), who greatly admired Hume and was likewise an anti-Scholastic intellectual. In cooperation with like-minded students at Edinburgh, Brown conducted this work as part of a club called "The Academy of Physics," whose goal was to apply Newtonian philosophy to a wide range of topics. With twenty editions between 1820–1860, his book *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* played a major role in solidifying emotions' disconnect from rationality's sway and in separating feelings from ethical and theological considerations. Over against Aristotelian emphases on intrinsic teleology, where there is movement toward a naturally good *telos*, Brown described emotions not as "movements," much less as movements of the soul, but rather as a kind of mental "state." While not being *of* anything in particular, emotions were somehow *in* the body, which was being reinterpreted along the lines of Newtonian physics. Brown divided all mental states into the three categories of "sensations," "thoughts," and "emotions," implying that emotions are taxonomically separable from thoughts or rationality. In addition to their separation from reason and normative, teleological considerations, the new category of emotions presented all feelings as being fundamentally the same (i.e., "*the* emotions"), which differed from the more internally varied classification of passions, affections, and sometimes sentiments. However, despite regrouping all feelings under the one heading "emotions," this separation of feelings from the soul led to a problem of identification. Indeed, Brown never did clearly define "emotions," leading to an ongoing problem of definition that was noticed already by William James, who in 1884 composed an essay with the title, "What is an Emotion?" Notwithstanding this issue, the work of Hume, Brown, and their colleagues found extensive reception in Europe and North America, successfully displacing the passions from psychological theory through the formation of a distinctively modern, secular psychology, where the emotions were non-cognitive and involuntary bodily stirrings. The tendency nowadays to translate *pathos* as "emotion," rather than "passion," shows the degree to which the latter has been displaced or forgotten.

For our purposes, we should note that the Hebrew Bible's terms for feelings, including its *yrʾ*-derivatives, are in strong concord with the older taxonomy of passions and affections. Not only do texts align *yrʾ* with knowledge, but the same terminology has normative, evaluative usages that exhibit voluntary, intentional

nuances, as well as assess some things as "higher" and others as "lower." Feeling, intentional activity, and rationality converge in ways that are dissonant with the modern category of the emotions.

The meaning and usages of yrʾ

We may now consider the meaning of the Hebrew Bible's *yrʾ*-derivatives, paying attention to some semantic distinctions concerning lexemes (i.e., sense, reference, and denotation; see Cruse 2011: 46–47; and Riemer 2010: 17–19). A lexeme's "sense" is its general concept, a somewhat more stable element of meaning. By contrast, its "reference(s)" would be that which is indicated in particular contexts, so that "reference" is theoretically much more varied. However, there is discernible continuity between the sense of *yrʾ* and its shifting, context-specific references: the latter are constrained, but not flatly determined, by the former. Lastly, a lexeme's "denotation" is the whole class of objects to which a lexeme refers. Of course, one might question whether *yrʾ*-derivatives are best understood as *referring* to this or that; it may be better to say that *yrʾ*-derivatives rightly *articulate* this or that. If we select such a denoted class for *yrʾ*-derivatives, it would probably be a class of relations that are in some way hierarchical, in some way consisting of upper and lower, or greater and lesser, ends. Indeed, *yrʾ*-derivatives are used to make predications about such relations from a third-person standpoint (e.g., *a* is *nôrāʾ* over *b*), as well as to articulate people's lived experience or practice of them (e.g., Figure-*b yrʾ* Figure-*a*).

The sense or general concept of *yrʾ* may be understood as, "to submit affectively, with affect; an affect-infused submission; to be subordinate." Some kind of submission or subordination is meant, and this activity includes something felt. With both "affect" and "submission," this sense encompasses *yrʾ*-derivatives' relevance to feelings ("to fear, be afraid); to normative, intentional conduct ("to worship; to execute cultic duties properly; to show deference"); and to nuances of hierarchy and authority, including their direct predication with the form *nôrāʾ*. These narrower meanings are derivative subcategories anchored in the sense. One should expect variety in the literature, where some contextual usages emphasize the aspect of feeling, with others emphasizing the aspect of activity or the aspect of hierarchical placement. Frequently, though, more than one aspect is at work simultaneously, so

that identifying the sense as we have here helps resolve the merely apparent *interpretive* conundrum of deciding between them. But a *translational* conundrum remains when trying to render *yrʾ*-derivatives into modern languages like English or German, especially since, as discussed above, those languages often presuppose psychological terminology that rules out such conjoined nuances from the outset.

Textual examples can illustrate these points. Since predications of *yrʾ*-derivatives ascribe a quality captured by this term, it is helpful to begin with the participial form *nôrāʾ*. The term *nôrāʾ* frequently predicates hierarchical standing, especially of the deity or the deity's actions, in relation to divine beings, human beings, and the earth. The following passages are just a few examples:

Psa 96:4–5

For Yhwh is great and lavishly praised; he is *nôrāʾ* over all the gods;
for all the gods of the peoples are worthless entities, but Yhwh made the heavens.

Psa 66:5

Go and behold the deeds of god; his action is *nôrāʾ* over human beings.

Psa 47:2–4

All you peoples, clap your hands, shout to god with a joyous voice;
for Yhwh the most high is *nôrāʾ*, a great king over all the earth;
he subjects peoples under us, populations under our feet.

In these texts and others, *nôrāʾ* appears in combination with the preposition "over" (Heb. *ʿal*, "over, above, on top"), and in some cases with the additional term "all." What does it mean to say that "*x* is *nôrāʾ* over [all] *y*?" Consider the excerpt from Psalm 96. Despite being interpretable in English as drawing a comparison, with Yhwh being *more nôrāʾ* than the gods, who implicitly would also be *nôrāʾ*, a comparison is not the point. Indeed, the syntactical elements for comparison are not in place: one would expect a different Hebrew formulation with the preposition *mn* preceding the surpassed object. Instead, the point is to stress singularity, where Yhwh's being *nôrāʾ* "over" locates him at the upper end of a hierarchical arrangement, where "all the gods" are distanced from Yhwh as *nôrāʾ*. It is therefore fitting in Psalm 47 that one finds talk of "greatness"and a metaphor of kingship accompanying the designation of Yhwh as *nôrāʾ*. This term has to do with articulating some kind of hierarchical

arrangement. Not coincidentally, the same formulation is used elsewhere to bolster the idea that it is fruitless to compare lower members of the heavenly court to Yhwh:

Psa 89:7–8

For who in the skies can face Yhwh, and who among the divine beings compares with Yhwh?

El is *naʿarāṣ* in the council of the holy ones, great and *nôrāʾ* over all around him.

Prefaced by the semantically comparable "fear" term *naʿarāṣ*, this verse not only uses the formula *nôrāʾ* + *ʿal* for depicting a hierarchical scenario, but also shows how such formulations are not in the interest of comparison. This use of *yrʾ*-derivatives is evaluative, with the emphasis being difference, not commonality. Analogous predications are possible with derivatives of *pḥd*, such as the statements in Deuteronomy that Israel's *yirʾāh* and *paḥad* will be "over" (*ʿal*) the "peoples" and "over" (*ʿal*) "all the land," pointing to Israel's status atop a political hierarchy (see Deut 2:25; 11:25). Given these usages, one should note how the terminology most often juxtaposed with *yrʾ*-derivatives are forms of *gdl*, "to be great." By extension, the occurrence of royal imagery in Psalm 47 makes sense. The Hebrew Bible's clearest case of divinized kingship is in Psalm 45, where the human king is in some sense divine.

Psa 45:4–7

Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, with your majesty and splendor.

In your splendor, prosper;

ride on the cause of truthfulness and the humility of justice

and may your right hand teach you *nôrāʾôt*.

Your throne, O god, is forever and ever.

No other text associates an individual human with *nôrāʾ*, which is usually reserved for Israel's God. Part of what bolsters the king's extraordinary standing is his access to what the text calls *nôrāʾôt*, which in this psalm is the content of royal knowledge (notably, *nôrāʾ* is not predicated of the king *per se*). This apparently divine knowledge that the king should internalize is paralleled by Solomon in 1 Kgs 3:28, where Solomon is the object of the verb *yrʾ* because of his *ḥokmat ʾelōhîm*, "divine wisdom." Such wisdom accentuates the king's special standing over against other

Israelites, all of whom *yrʾ* Solomon. In other words, a *yrʾ*-derivative indicates the proper activity of subjects before higher-ranking figures such as a king (for a non-royal example, see Lev 19:3). Fear terminally could express where various parties fit within various hierarchical scenarios, with predications of *nôrāʾ* aligned with those on top and verbal forms indicating the proper mode of conduct for lower-ranking figures. These *yrʾ*-derivatives exhibit evaluative nuances, as well as indicate normative and intentional activity.

As a type of normative activity, *yrʾ* may consist of content that is learned and intentionally practiced. Jeremiah 10 is a text where the verb indicates cultic activity or "worship," which the writer says should be withheld from foreign deities and directed toward Yhwh alone. Of these foreign deities, one reads:

Jer 10:5–7

Do not *yrʾ* them, for they cannot do evil,
nor do they have the capacity to do good.
There is none like you, O Yhwh. You are great (*gdl*),
and your name is great (*gdl*) in power.
Who would not *yrʾ* you,
O king of the nations? For that is fitting for you,
for among all the skilled of the nations and among all their kings,
there is none like you.

One should not assume that *yrʾ* is strictly behavior, devoid of a felt component. Feelings are one dimension of what the scribe assumes can be carried out properly or improperly: human affective life is assessed with reference to standards exterior to the individual who engages in *yrʾ*. Moreover, the command to withhold *yrʾ* from some objects and direct it to others shows how voluntary dimensions are at work, so that Jer 10:1–16 offers several explicit rationales for engaging in *yrʾ* in one way rather than another. A further text where one senses a similar idea is 2 Kings 17:

2 Kgs 17:27–28

So the king of Assyria commanded, "Send there one of the priests whom you took into exile from there; let him go and live there and teach them the custom of the god of the land." So one of the priests whom they had exiled from Samaria came and lived in Bethel. And he taught them how they should *yrʾ* Yhwh.

In this passage, *yrʾ* is again a normative mode of activity. It is mandated by a Mesopotamian ruler, taught by a priest, learned by the inhabitants of Samaria, and enacted before deity. The wording, "*how* they should *yrʾ* Yhwh" reflects normative expectations for cultic practice, illustrating how *yrʾ* encompasses more than spontaneous feeling—and is thus dissonant with the modern category of "emotions." As in Jeremiah 10, the activity of *yrʾ* involves content that is judged by norms exterior to the individuals who embody the activity. One can fail in the doing of *yrʾ*. For this reason, texts may emphasize the need to *yrʾ* in one way rather than another, so that people properly submit to exterior authority.

Complemented by our attention to the history of psychology, this summary of *yrʾ*-derivatives' semantics can help explain why it made sense among ancient scribes to pair the notions of "fear" and "deity."

Anthropological dimensions of yrʾ

Finally, we should mention how these issues inform the anthropological outlooks in the Hebrew Bible, where the moral agents who carry out *yrʾ* are assessed in a range of ways. Indeed, some texts speak of *yrʾ* as a normal function of the human *lb* ("heart"), and in such texts the affective dimensions of meaning may have priority (i.e., "to fear, be afraid"). A few examples would be Deut 20:1, 3, 8; Jer 51:45–46; Psa 27:3; and 112:7–8, where, among other things, *yrʾ* has to do with one's stance over against adversaries, including in the context of battle. Here, a "tender" *lb* should be avoided: a tender or soft *lb* is fertile ground for *yirʾāh*, which in battle may induce cowardice. A "firm" or hard *lb* is preferable, approaching the virtue of resoluteness.

Other normative modes of activity are clear in texts like Jer 5:20–24 or Deut 5:29, where the idea is that people are responsible for deciding to *yrʾ* God with their *lb*. In such passages, this anthropological faculty may be regulated by human agents themselves, who are capable of submitting themselves to external, divine authority.

But not all texts portray human beings as reliable for managing their *lb* in this way. Elsewhere, adequate *yirʾāh* only surfaces in the human *lb* if God unilaterally enables or endows it, which suggests a more critical view of human capacities. One example of such an outlook is Psalm 86, where the psalmist's heart cannot generate proper submission because the *lb* is divided; only when Yhwh "unifies" it (*yḥd*)

through instruction can the heart serve as the venue for *yrʾ* (see 86:11). A more well-known case is Jer 32:38–41, where, in order for Israel to *yrʾ* Yhwh properly, the oracle says Yhwh will "place" his own *yirʾāh* into the human heart, which effectively transforms human nature. The envisioned outcome is permanent alignment with Yhwh: "I will put my *yirʾāh* into their *lbb*, so that they will not turn away from me" (Jer 32:40). In this case, adequate submission to Yhwh is contingent on divine initiative.

We have summarized several philological, taxonomical, and anthropological dimensions of *yrʾ*-derivatives. While much more could be discussed here, this overview hopefully gives an impression of the facets of fear in the Hebrew Bible.

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