

The Fear of the Lord as Theological Method

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“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 7:21a)¹

Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord. (Ps 40:3b)

Abstract — The fear of the Lord is a motif that makes its way into all major strands of the biblical canon, yet it is often overlooked for its theological value. As prominent as the notion is, it would appear that the fear of the Lord is not only a theme to consider when engaging the Bible theologically but one that would also serve as a paradigm for how theology should be done in the first place. In order to arrive at this juncture, this article problematizes any monolithic account of the fear of the Lord within the canon and offers a dialectical approach to God-talk in which cataphatic and apophatic moments are crucial to the possibilities and limits of theological reflection.

Keywords — *apophatic, cataphatic, fear of the Lord, idolatry, theological method, biblical theology*

When Christians read that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,”² it is questionable if in fact they know how to interpret this passage. A number of reasons could be put forth for this predicament. First, and perhaps most obvious, the notion of fear is unsavory and/or offensive,

1. Biblical passages cited are taken from the NRSV.

2. Variants of this phrase can be found in Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33. The “fear of the Lord” as a motif is more widespread; the phrase will appear in quotation marks throughout this article for the specific reason that it is taken to be a canonical motif that makes its way throughout the Christian Scriptures that at the same time has a wide range of diversity behind it; although the roots of the word “fear” will be assumed to be uniform (*yr’/yir’ab* for the OT instances, *phobeomai/phobos* for the NT), the object (*Yahweh, Elohim, kyrios, theos*) as well as historical and literary contexts (pentateuchal, prophetic, sapiential in the OT; narrative, historical, epistolary in the NT) can vary. Some of the diversity will be accounted for in subsequent sections of this piece, but as a programmatic matter of clarity, a species of canonical integrity surrounding the motif is assumed from the outset.



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especially within a “culture of fear” in which the media and market forces not only espouse the virtue of eliminating fear but also use fear as a tool to elicit attention and create desire.³ Second, biblically, the Johannine literature is a (if not the) dominant voice in the minds of contemporary Christians so that when one reads, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (1 John 4:18), the assumption can be drawn that fear is a negative disposition, one implying punishment and suggesting an innate incompatibility with love. The prevalence of the term “fear” in the Bible is astounding, especially in light of the many passages in which the people of God are told not to fear. And yet, many passages suggest that fearing God is a positive, even necessary, disposition, not only for the purposes of gaining wisdom but also for being in a right relationship with God. The biblical text itself problematizes any single, monolithic account of fear despite the contemporary tendency to think of it primarily in negative terms.

The pursuit of greater clarity regarding the theme of fear in general and the “fear of the Lord” in particular is not simply of importance for biblical interpretation but also for theological construction and Christian praxis. When one assumes that the theological task is not simply the construal of a system of beliefs that has God as its object but also the pursuit of a way of life that is God-directed, then the kinds of dispositions and intentions associated with this pursuit or journey are all-important. Methodologically speaking, theology does not only require articulation but embodiment and performance as well, and when taken as such, the Christian life has to be characterized not only by intellectual habits but by distinct practices and affective dispositions/temper.⁴

In other words, the theological task has to do with how one speaks of *and* relates to God, and when one looks at the OT especially, there is no more pronounced claim within the canon as to how believers are to relate to their God than in the “fear of the Lord.” Biblically speaking, the “fear of the Lord” *is* theological method because the Bible depicts knowing God and relating to God in interrelated ways.⁵ From the perspective of Scripture, a theologian is a “God-fearer.”

3. For contemporary treatments of this topic in its American form, see Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear* (New York: Basic, 1999) and Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear Revisited* (4th ed.; New York: Continuum, 2006); for a Christian assessment of this situation, see Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007).

4. I am obviously betraying my Wesleyan and Pentecostal background and my Orthodox sympathies when casting theology in these terms. These inclinations suggest that orthodoxy ought to be accompanied by orthopraxis and orthopatbos, the latter being the category in which I suggest the “fear of the Lord” motif ought to be considered.

5. I respectfully disagree with Gerhard von Rad, who, within the particular context of the Wisdom literature suggests that the “modern reader must . . . eliminate, in the case of the

Such claims appear *prima facie* quite strange to contemporary believers, suggesting that despite its prominence in all the major sections of *Tanakh* and in addition to being a prominent theme in the NT, the “fear of the Lord” does little “theological work” for the everyday Christian; in other words, the motif does little to inform Christian identity and practice. Despite fear’s prominence in the Bible as a disposition believers are to have in relation to their God, the contemporary cultural climate has great difficulty in accommodating a positive understanding of “the fear of the Lord.” The present task is thus to account further for the difficulty of the motif’s use today, to offer a more diversified account of fear within the Bible, to introduce the motif formally into the activity of construing theology proper, and to suggest ways that the theme can do theological work. The aim of this essay is to retrieve the “fear of the Lord” as a theological category that ought to inform and shape any effort that attempts to be explicitly biblical as part of its theologically programmatic agenda. Stated differently, the “fear of the Lord” is an orienting disposition that ought to be prolegomenal and integral to the theological task.

I

Why do contemporary Christians have such difficulties with the notion of “fearing the Lord”? In addition to the reasons stated above (namely, the cultural aversion to the theme as well as the Johannine juxtaposition of fear with love), other important factors could be put forth. Perhaps one of the most dangerous reasons has to do with the way Christians are ill-disposed to certain themes within their “Old” Testament. Christians have a long tradition of explaining away the Jewish-Christian schism, usually in unfavorable terms for the descendants of Jacob. The most extreme example of this hostility is obviously the promulgation of various forms of anti-Semitism, but theologically, one finds a number of other, subtler arguments: the epitome of Christ as the ultimate revelation of who and how God is (“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” [John 14:9]⁶), dispensationalist schemas that explain away the Jewish-Christian divide through

word ‘fear’, the idea of something emotional, of a specific, psychological form of the experience of God” (*Wisdom in Israel* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1972], 66). It is difficult to maintain from a canonical point of view that (1) the experience of God can be separate from the pursuit of the knowledge of God and that (2) the word “fear” within the motif of the “fear of the Lord” in the Bible does not fluctuate between a holy reverence that suggests worship as well as a terrifying dread of the Holy One of Israel. Of course, different strands have their different emphases, but the diversity of the text as a whole is worth keeping in mind as the connotative possibilities of specific strands are pursued.

6. I am not arguing against this claim *per se* but rather against how people often *use* this claim to make the subsequent judgment that the OT portrayal of God is now dispensable because of Jesus.

imposed ages, a strong distinction between “law” and “gospel,” neatly dividing biblical history into the ages of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, etc. What one finds among many contemporary Christian churches is a blatant disregard for the OT witness, so that Karl Rahner’s remark that most Christians are “almost mere ‘monotheists’” in their practical life⁷ (rather than being intentionally trinitarian) could be joined to the observation that they are generally almost “mere supersessionists” or “mere Marcionites” as well.

Obviously, this scenario creates a number of difficulties for the contemporary appropriation of certain biblical themes: the role of the law within Israel’s ethos, the importance of holiness for understanding the very nature of God, and certainly the theme of fear as a disposition regarding how individuals should relate to God. The assumption of many believers today is that there is an inherent disjunction between these OT themes and certain pronounced themes in the NT (e.g., grace and love). In favoring the latter to the neglect of the former, contemporary Christians oftentimes have poor representations of those themes they find most agreeable: grace tends to be “cheapened” and love overly romanticized or sentimentalized. These hermeneutical dispositions tend to bridle the Bible’s ability both to challenge the assumptions of the prevalent *Zeitgeist* as well as to offer an account that reconfigures the terms under consideration.

No clearer indication of this domestication of the biblical witness can be suggested than the avoidance of the “fear the Lord” as a prominent motif in the Bible. Fearing God does not fit well within acceptable norms today since part of the modern project has included the emancipation of fear and all other “tyrannical” dispositions in favor of freedom and liberty. A person who fears another individual or object stands subjugated to that fear; therefore, one of the goals of secular society has been to introduce a “brave new world” in which no one is compelled to fear another. Modern western culture finds fear to be anathema, thereby questioning any relevance or significance that may be attributed to the biblical theme of fearing God. Love, on the other hand, is quite acceptable (one could say *too acceptable*) to the modern person in the way one is to relate to others, including God. Therefore, in the minds of most Christians, loving God would take precedence over fearing God simply because the former is more fitting given the contemporary way in which healthy and formative relationships are narrated.

Interestingly enough, the OT does not speak about “loving God” to the degree that it speaks of “fearing God.” Usually, when “loving God” does appear, it does so alongside other themes;⁸ the prominent example

7. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998), 10.

8. Lewis John Eron makes this observation in “You Who Revere the Lord, Bless the Lord!” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18 (1981): 67–68.

here is the love commandment in Deuteronomy. The passage that Jews hold most dear, the *Shema* (Deut 6:4), has as its bookends the notions of both fear and love. In Deut 6:1–2, one sees the notion of fear: “Now this is the commandment . . . that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life”; the great love commandment that Jesus emphasizes in his ministry, and so which Christians find quite compelling, is found in Deut 6:5. The great theological statement that is the *Shema* is surrounded by both the dispositions of fear and love. Obviously, the Bible does not find fear and love to be contradictory to one another.

With such a statement, though, one is reminded of 1 John 4:18. Were fear and love not contrasted in this passage? The task of retrieving the value of fearing God as a disposition must begin with a more thorough account of fear in the Bible in order that nuances may be observed and unhelpful generalizations avoided.

II

The Bible appears to assume that fear is a “natural” disposition related to what it means to be human, at least after the fall. It seems that humans will inevitably fear something because they are continually in a state of vulnerability with the possibilities of suffering and death always at hand. In the OT especially, the subjects of fear are usually humans. Many of these instances show humans fearing nature, enemies, or other threats, but interestingly enough, the usual object of fear in the vast majority of instances (approximately four-fifths) is God.⁹ Although a predominantly OT occurrence, the NT also pairs human fear and God together, making it a cross-testamental theme.¹⁰

Canonically, one sees fear demonstrate itself quite early in Scripture, i.e., immediately after the fall; once Adam and Eve disobey, the narrative states explicitly that they attempted to hide from God (Gen 3:8), the very same God with whom they had communed intimately before. They hid because they were “afraid” (Gen 3:10). When Adam and Eve express their fear, something apparently has gone awry; God is not pleased with what has happened and begins to question all those involved. Taking this narrative as a controlling device, one can see that Adam and Eve’s fear during this narrative is an inappropriate disposition, especially toward God; this kind of fear is nothing less than an extension of sin.¹¹

9. Harold C. Washington, “Fear,” *NIDB* 2:439–40.

10. This dynamic is less prominent in the NT, but the OT motifs and emphases are detectable (Washington, “Fear,” 442).

11. Washington remarks that the “primordial religious dread” often associated with the “numinous” is detectable in the OT but that “a more important motive for fearfulness before

What can be made of this “Adamic fear”? This species of fear occurred within the condition of alienation, and so in this situation God was very much a threat to humanity’s existence since now they had placed themselves *against* God by disobeying him. More must be said at this point, however, since the “fear of the Lord” suggests God as its object as well. In order to understand “Adamic fear,” one cannot simply suggest that God is its object, but the subject who fears and the *subject’s condition* are important to note as well. In this case, Adam and Eve were fearful because they were in a state of alienation, and in that state they considered themselves vulnerable and naked. They feared for their lives and self-preservation, and given their alienated state, God, who originally sustained their lives, was now a threat. Tracing fear in this way leaves open the possibility for those negative associations that are made in relation to it; obviously, this kind of fear is related to sin since it envisions both vulnerability and ultimately death as possibilities (see Heb 2:15). All are subject to this kind of fear since present human reality is continually conditioned by the implications of the fall.

When God reveals himself and says “fear not” to the hearers, it is in light of a perpetual state of vulnerability and fear.¹² The “fear not” formula, one that makes its way in theophanies and even in sacral war traditions,¹³ attempts to allay this inclination to fear with the assuring presence of God. At these moments God is often depicted as a source of strength, courage, and comfort to vulnerable individuals and to a dependent people in need of guidance, assurance, and hope.¹⁴ Whether it be to the patri-

God is awareness of sin” (“Fear,” 440). This sin-laden connotation to this specific kind of fear leads John Bunyan to call it an “ungodly fear” (see *A Treatise of the Fear of God, The Greatness of the Soul, A Holy Life* [ed. Richard L. Greaves; Oxford: Clarendon, 1981], 26–29). The fear related to the human awareness of sin is in contrast to the holy nature of God. Sinful humans cannot help but be fearful in the presence of the Holy God of Israel. Although some would want to equate “holiness” with the “numinous” (as H. F. Fuhs does in “ $\text{נִיָּ} \text{yārē}^{\prime}$,” *TDOT* 6:300, a move in line with what Rudolf Otto has made prominent in *The Idea of the Holy*), there is something to be said for contrasting the two concepts since, biblically speaking, “holiness” is not so much a feature of a universal experience of that which is transcendently other and mysterious but rather the essence of a very particular God who reveals himself to particular individuals in particular circumstances and requires of them particular behaviors that are in accordance with his will; “absolute holiness” and “moral holiness,” as Fuhs distinguishes them, are in fact quite interrelated since the latter is a revelatory extension of the former.

12. The running biblical motif that humans cannot see God face to face and live (prominent in Exod 33:20) should be kept in mind especially when in theophanies the “fear not” formula is used. In light of the many instances in which encounters with the divine are portrayed as dangerous, Fuhs remarks, “Fear (of death) is therefore the natural human reaction when someone experiences divine revelation in a theophany, dream, or vision” (“ $\text{נִיָּ} \text{yārē}^{\prime}$,” 301).

13. Washington, “Fear,” 440.

14. See 1 Chr 28:20; Pss 34:7; 56:4; 118:6; Jer 30:10; Dan 10:12, 19; Acts 9:31, among other passages.

archs (e.g., Gen 15:1; 26:24) or to the nation of Israel as it enters (Gen 46:3–4) and then leaves Egypt in order to take possession of the Promised Land (Deut 1:21; 3:2, 22), a continual theme that is emphasized is that God's people are not to fear.¹⁵

Obviously, "Adamic fear" is not the fear esteemed by the Bible as the appropriate disposition to have in relation to God. "Adamic fear" is not the beginning of wisdom but rather the beginning of folly in that it is an indication of humanity's alienation from its life source, God. Coupled with those many instances in which God tells the people not to fear is the command to fear him. Contrary to "Adamic fear," the "fear of the Lord," as a motif, suggests goodness (Ps 31:19), delight (Neh 1:11; Isa 11:3), praise (Ps 22:23), salvation (Ps 85:9), and life itself (Prov 14:27; 19:23).

Scripture has a way of counterpointing these two kinds of fears. One notable passage is Exod 20:20, where Moses remarks, "*Do not be afraid*; for God has come only to test you and *to put the fear of him upon you* so that you do not sin" (italics added). The NT does so as well with the Synoptic passage in which Jesus is teaching about how to fear properly: "*Do not fear* those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; *rather fear him* who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28; see also Luke 12:5). With the mention of "hell" and "destruction" in this last passage, it is easy to overlook that this statement occurs in a context of *assurance*: those who fear properly are comforted by the assertion of their value and worth in God's eyes.

"The fear of the Lord" can be taught and cultivated, and God makes it clear that it should be so for Israel's posterity. One sees this last point significantly during Moses' "Farewell Discourse." As Moses shares with the children of Israel those things they must hold on to once they arrive in the Promised Land, he mentions this motif prominently: "So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being" (Deut 10:12). Unlike Adam's condition of fallenness and estrangement, this kind of fear—one could call it "Mosaic fear"—assumes redemption and salvation for present and future generations. In the fulfillment of God's promises to the patriarchs, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were to continue to fear God as part of their observance of the everlasting covenant (Jer 32:39–40; Luke 1:50).

"Mosaic fear" has a number of features. Many times it is coupled with moral obligations that can be termed covenant-observing practices.¹⁶ Often

15. For Christians, the Lukan account of the birth narratives has a special importance with regard to the theme of fear (Luke 1:13, 30).

16. The place of the "fear of the Lord" in Leviticus is important to note here. In 19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43, the "fear of the Lord" is coupled with a number of social concerns.

one sees the “fear of the Lord” alongside directives to keep God’s commandments.¹⁷ Only those who fear God and who keep his commandments can be righteous before him. God-fearers can enjoy his confidence,¹⁸ and they deserve honor and imitation in that they revere God as the only object of their worship and affection.¹⁹ In this sense, God-fearers are wise, for they realize that God, and only God, is to be praised and feared.

“Mosaic fear,” by being a fear that operates from the condition of reconciliation, is complex. Obviously, God is a threat to Adam’s existence because Adam positioned himself against God, but what about “Mosaic fear”? Is God a threat to Israel’s existence as well? At this point, the logic becomes much more nuanced on several counts. Certainly the fear that Adam experienced and the fear that Moses advocated are of a different nature, given that they operate with the assumption of two different conditions for the subject, namely, alienation and reconciliation. And yet, as one sees in the case of Israel’s wanderings and difficulties in taking possession of and living in the Promised Land, God can certainly be a threat to Israel as well, largely because Israel continually poses the possibility of falling away by breaching the covenant bond through disobedience and serving other gods. Therefore, “Mosaic fear” as a positive disposition suggests in part the need to *fear properly in a continued and sustained way*. God should be feared continuously because only God can sustain life. “Mosaic fear” can always revert wrongfully to “Adamic fear” in that the perpetual state of human vulnerability can be either God-tenored or “other”-tenored. The “fear of the Lord” envisions human vulnerability as only reaching fulfillment, actualization, and security in the sustaining, awful presence of God. Stated otherwise, perpetual dependence on God is the only true form of independence.

The “fear of the Lord” is inherently dialectical in that it suggests humanity’s perpetual vulnerability (which is something that modernity has tried to eradicate through its continued quest for mastery and dominion over all that is) while affirming that this vulnerability is rightfully maintained and transformed when envisioned in the presence of God within a reconciled state. Such a doxological orientation suggests that depending, serving, obeying, and fearing God in a reconciled state are the paths to wholeness, peace, joy, and life.²⁰ Both vulnerability and worship are two

17. Other passages in Deuteronomy make the case quite clearly: 5:29; 6:13, 24; 8:6; 10:12; 28:58. Other passages make the point of coupling both fearing God and keeping his commandments, such as 1 Sam 12:14 and Ecc 12:13.

18. Ps 25:14.

19. Washington states the point succinctly: “Properly, however, to ‘fear the Lord’ means to worship the Lord exclusively and to live in righteousness. These elements are integrated seamlessly in Deuteronomy, where covenantal loyalty entails sole worship of the Lord and faithful obedience” (“Fear,” 440).

20. For example, one sees that “Qohelet’s positive—sometimes even exuberant—counsel concerning the good gifts of God . . . often occurs in those very places where he expounds

aspects to the biblical motif of “fearing God” that ought to be continuously maintained in tandem;²¹ if one were to be lost, the remainder would be something altogether different. Without the notion of vulnerability, one’s worship of God could be self-serving. Without God as its proper object, vulnerability could resort to something else for its security, a move that would lead to idolatry. The balance needed is suggested to believers when Paul exhorts his readers to make “holiness perfect in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1).²²

Given the way the “fear of the Lord” has to be maintained in this double sense, it is important to note the dangers that lurk when translations oftentimes use terms like “reverence” and “awe” in lieu of “fear.” The positive contribution of these translations is that they are attempting to contrast “Mosaic fear” with “Adamic fear.” The danger, though, is that the semantic possibilities can be diminished in the process of translation so that what is rendered is more socially agreeable within a given context. The term “reverence” serves as an example. “Reverence” suggests that *I* do the “revering,” and so I am in control to choose to revere something; the act is entirely within my own hands.²³ Again, “reverence” can imply the kind of taming that is so characteristic of the modern project of overturning any account that does not lie within its preferred conventions for knowing and verification. In that I choose to revere something implies that ultimately I revere most of all my free will since I freely exercise it whenever I see fit. In

on the meaning of fearing God” (Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qobele’s Theological Rhetoric* [New York: de Gruyter, 2005], 84–85).

21. Because the biblical notion of “fear” is so complex, especially when it has God as its object, many have tried to identify the specific senses of the term in different contexts. Miles V. Van Pelt and Walter C. Kaiser identify three aspects (terror, respect, and worship) and proceed to identify passages in which “fear” is best considered as participating in the connotative spectrum of each (see “yr’,” *NIDOTTE* 2:527–33); such an analysis presents obvious examples in which the term “fear” would have to fit one of these cases (for instance, the call to *respect* one’s parents in Lev 19:3). The difficulty arises when God is the object of fear: “Yahweh is almost exclusively the object of fear when associated with worship . . . It is also true, however, that Yahweh is occasionally the object of terror, especially in the context of divine wrath or judgment. *The means of differentiating between the two aspects of fear depends almost entirely upon context*” (529; emphasis added). Although what Van Pelt and Kaiser are suggesting could be similar to what has been distinguished as “Adamic” and “Mosaic” fear in this piece, it is worth noting as well that within the act of worship both vulnerability and adoration are implied. Worship does not entirely exclude some aspect of terror in that one can be confronted with one’s own vulnerability (a terrifying experience no less) when worshipping God.

22. The mention of Paul is important here, for in contrast to the way fear is contrasted to love in the Johannine testimony, Paul maintains much of the OT significance surrounding the motif; see Horst Balz, “*phobos*,” *EDNT* 3:433–34.

23. Lawrence H. Davis succumbs to this difficulty when he depicts reverence as a “rational attitude,” all the while suggesting (only then to ignore) that other accounts of reverence may be possible, including “terror” (“The Importance of Reverence,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 [1990]: 138).

contrast to the empowerment suggested by “revering,” the qualities of conditionedness, tentativeness, and dependency implied by the *fear* of the Lord ought to be in the fray when considering the biblical notion. At this point it is important to note the way “fear” is often coupled with “trembling” in a number of passages.²⁴ Given these moments, it is difficult to reconcile the *choice* of “revering” with the physical *reaction* of “trembling.”²⁵

With this inflected account of the “fear of the Lord” motif in Scripture, one wonders how this notion, so prevalent in both testaments as the way to relate to God properly, can take shape within the task of theological reflection. Can the “fear of the Lord” be maintained in light of the perpetual need to articulate, embody, and witness to the truth that is the gospel?

III

Perhaps no statement is as famous within the Barthian corpus as the one found in his early essay “Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie”: “As ministers (Theologen) we ought to speak of God. We are human (Menschen), however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory.”²⁶ Despite Barth’s order, it is apparent that the limiting factor precedes the former obligating one, given the logic and order of salvation history; we are first *Menschen* before we are *Theologen*. As humans, we are inherently incapable of speaking of God; no metaphor, no description, no image can exhaustively and determinately express the magnitude that is God. The limits of human speech, and by extension human concepts, are suggested by the biblical witness and find vital expression in the initial verses of the Ten Commandments. God’s supremacy over other gods and the forbiddance of making idols are precisely injunctions related to systematic theological reflection. The theological task as pursued by professional theologians runs the risk of being an idolatrous activity when it fails to consider the limits Barth points out. When theologians do not acknowledge the tentative quality of their deliberations, that at any mo-

24. E.g., Pss 2:11; 119:120; Mark 5:33; 1 Cor 2:3; 2 Cor 7:15; Eph 6:5; and Phil 2:12.

25. Along these lines, Ellen Davis remarks, “Yet in avoiding the word ‘fear,’ translators are taking the edge off the point that the biblical writers are making. The writers are speaking first of all of our proper gut response to God. Fear is an elemental response; reverence is a head trip. Fear is the unmistakable feeling in our bodies, in our stomachs and our scalp, when we run up hard against the power of God” (*Getting Involved with God* [Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2001], 102).

26. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper, 1975), 186; a more extensive engagement with these issues can be found in *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957).

ment the task can and does fall short of God's glory, then that activity becomes a vicious one leading to vanity and trifling.²⁷

The fear of the Lord precisely points out this danger of the theological task. One can say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning and end of wisdom simply because it acknowledges unconditionally and without reserve that we humans are not God and our expressions of God's nature are inherently flawed and limited in that they are *human* expressions. Yet, the theological task finds its vitality and its identity precisely in this condition of self-restriction in that in doing so it takes into account the nature of its object by acknowledging from the start its own limitations. The fear of the Lord provides the conceptual space within the theological task for affirming that at every point in the process the recognition is available of the tentative quality of all theological reflection. As God told the Israelites, "Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely" (Deut 4:15). The "fear of the Lord" reminds theologians and practitioners of the faith that danger is constantly lurking when humans attempt to "formalize" and reify their patterns of God-talk. In this sense one can speak of "holy fear" when considering these aspects of the theme in that it inspires not only a fear of God but also a fear of oneself in coming short before God. Holy fear has in its purview the possible dangers of blasphemy and conceptual idolatry, of misrepresenting or skewing God's all-important self-revelation. In the opinion of John Webster, these considerations are of utmost importance for the theological task: "This requirement—that God be feared and his name hallowed—is in many respects *the* requirement for theological reason. . . . A holy theology, therefore, will be properly mistrustful of its own command of its subject-matter."²⁸

IV

Barth mentions the notion of obligation as well, and this point also must be considered adequately. As the church, we are obligated to proclaim the gospel, to speak for God as he renders us capable by his grace. It is at this point when one could think that holy fear could be put to the side, because believers ultimately have to give an account of their faith. As a pursuer of the richness of dialectical method, however, Barth would not want to minimize one aspect of this situation when exploring the possibilities of

27. Accounts that attempt to domesticate the divine transcendence in light of running programmatic concerns for consistency and rationality seem to be especially susceptible to this danger. One sees this situation often in the case of modernity's presuppositions; for a helpful account along these lines, see William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

28. John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 28.

the other. Both the inability and the obligation must be held in tandem in order that the limits and possibilities of theological reflection may be adequately considered and formative for what follows. The same logic can be transposed to the “fear of the Lord.”

As mentioned above, the fear of the Lord should be part and parcel of the theological task, yet it appears *prima facie* to be counterintuitive that a holy fear or a holy terror could be cultivated. After all, is not fear a primal reaction that is nonrational? Here we come to one of the more difficult aspects of this theological tenet. One only learns to fear God when one communes with him, for only in his presence does one come into contact with the God who inspires holy fear. Essentially, fear is not something that we can create for ourselves; it is something that can only be experienced in the presence of that which causes fear. Interestingly, the logic of Thomas Aquinas’s placing the fear of the Lord as a gift of the Holy Spirit is telling: in being a gift and not simply a virtue that is sustained through habituation, Thomas suggests that fearing the Lord is more of a pathic than a poetic activity, one that an individual “suffers” rather than “creates.”²⁹

In suffering the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* prior to and throughout the process of engaging in the rational aspects of the theological task, the theologian can be predisposed and sustained in a profound, existential way that subsequently informs and leads to rational activity. In this regard, the “fear of the Lord” is not non-rational but more akin to pre-rational in the sense that it emphasizes vision and perception prior to judgment and action. In this way, fearing God operates in the realm normally considered prolegomenal in that it influences all rational activity that follows; however, the “fear of the Lord” is not simply a principle affirmed at the beginning of a theological treatise that informs the way an emerging system develops. Rather, the fear of the Lord is the disposition that sustains and maintains the task of theological reflection as legitimately theological.

In this vein one can understand more clearly the apophatic method that is characteristic of the Christian mystical tradition in its many forms. Although apophaticism is gradually gaining a greater hearing today in large part due to deconstructionist portrayals of human language, this method was operative and pivotal for past theologians who attempted to retain some sort of acknowledgement of God’s “otherness” in their cataphatic, speculative reasoning. Antedated by two major strands of literature (the

29. *Summa Theologica* Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 1 (rev. ed.; 5 vols.; Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 2:877–78. That is not to say that fearing the Lord cannot be learned, as we are called to do in Deut 31:12–13, but clearly this learning is fostered in the presence of God and not as a fanciful inquiry in which the limits and possibilities of such an exercise are predetermined by human abilities. Thomas anticipates the same point when he compares gifts and virtues in Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 3 (2:880) and a. 8 (2:884–85) and characterizes gifts as making one more disposed to the move of the Holy Spirit.

interaction between Moses and Yahweh on Sinai as depicted in Exodus and Plato's "Cave Allegory" in Book 7 of the *Republic*³⁰), theologians from Augustine to the pseudo-Denys, Bonaventure to Vladimir Lossky have attempted to show that theological language itself is self-subverting.³¹ Many today would find such a move distasteful and would resort to a *reductio ad absurdum*, stating that if theological speech is also a form of "unsaying" or "speaking away,"³² then the entire theological enterprise would be impossible.

Apophaticists would not entirely disagree. Apophaticism at its best is not a voyage into a void or empty darkness; it is the *humbling discovery*³³ of acknowledging that language as a human construct is limited in its expressive potential to convey not simply a "Wholly Other" but *the* "Holy Other."³⁴ With every affirmation, there is implicit not only its negation but also the negation of the negation itself, resulting in a two-tiered discourse in which language, for all its usefulness, has to be transcended as well.³⁵ The

30. For an analysis of the historical precedents of the apophatic tradition and a historical treatment of a number of its instantiations, see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

31. Note that "theological language" is subsequently labeled as "self-subverting." In other words, apophaticism is impossible without cataphaticism, and theologians are called to operate cataphatically in excess; in Denys Turner's mind, penultimate unknowability (and, I would add, penultimate silence) is always idolatrous ("Apophaticism, Idolatry, and the Claims of Reason" in *Silence and the Word* (ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 28). God-talk is necessarily cataphatic *and* apophatic, a point brought out well by the citation from Barth, above. Again, Turner states the case quite eloquently when elaborating the impulse of the pseudo-Denys in the *Mystical Theology*: "Rather, for the pseudo-Denys, the way of negation demands prolixity; it demands the maximisation, not the minimisation of talk about God; it demands that we talk about God in as many ways as possible, even in as many conflicting ways as possible, that we use up the whole stock-in-trade of imagery and discourse in our possession, so as thereby to discover ultimately the inadequacy of all of it, deserts, silences, dark nights, and all" (17).

32. I borrow these terms from Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

33. The language here is intentional, combining two of the major points of the chapters by Turner and Paul S. Fiddes in *Silence and the Word*: apophaticism is a discovery because it presumes that one is already in the "messiness" of theological prolixity (Turner); the process is humbling, however, because the discovery is one of limits (Fiddes). In his contribution, Fiddes points out that the "fear of the Lord" was precisely a mechanism within the wisdom literature for inspiring humility at the appropriate times (see "The Quest for a Place Which Is 'Not-a-Place': The Hiddenness of God and the Presence of God," in *Silence and the Word*, 36–37). Interestingly, Barth speaks of the "fear of the Lord" springing forth from the "discovery" of certain claims regarding one's faith in God ("The Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom," *Int* 14 [1960]: 433–39, esp. 438).

34. The expressivity of language actually is extended by the process of negation; see Oliver Davies's essay "Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence," in *Silence and the Word*, for a further treatment.

35. Again, Turner in *The Darkness of God* is helpful here.

silence envisioned is not one in which nothing else *can* be said but one in which there is *no need* to say anything more. In this depiction, theology is worship, and the “fear of the Lord” is the affective dimension of being in the presence of the “Holy Other.”

CONCLUSION

Theological reflection is neither a right nor a privilege; it is a gift and a vocation, and as with all gifts and vocations, it bears the marks of the one who gives and the one who calls. Ideas and concepts concerning the eternal one can very well be idolatrous, in effect corrupting the gift, if they take a certain precedence over or if they are untrue in relation to the gift-giver himself. Part of the reason that contemporary Christians avoid such a prominent biblical theme as the fear of the Lord is that the latter questions all things, including the viability of theological reflection itself. All things, either terrestrial or ideological, stand judged in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. It is no wonder that the Bible calls all engaged in the peregrination of being his holy people, including those of us who dare call ourselves theologians, to fear him. Fearing God is the only viable theological *modus operandus*, the only adequate “foundation” that suggests conditionedness, tentativeness, and a terrorizing and yet joyful disposition to refuse “control.” In this respect, theologians would be wise to follow the example of the two Marys, who unlike the guards, were able to leave the tomb “with fear and great joy” (Matt 28:8), and in doing so, they came face to face with Jesus himself along the way.