Reconsidering the Fear of God[1] in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible in the Light of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*[2]

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an attempt to discern the extent to which Rudolf Otto's points of view, specifically the idea of "the holy" as the mysterium tremendum, *influenced scholarly opinion on the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the* HB *in general and in the wisdom literature in particular. It is found that Otto did indeed have a great influence on the understanding of the meaning of the fear of God, but that scholars also allowed their opinions to be guided by a competent analysis of the different nuances that the fear of God takes on in the biblical text itself. The findings lead to the conclusion that scholars should recognise both the possibilities and the limitations of Otto's views in any attempt to delineate the meaning and significance the fear of God in the* HB.

A   INTRODUCTION

Perdue has pointed out that the wisdom literature has in recent decades regained a legitimate place in biblical scholarship, after centuries of compara-

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[1]   The fear of God in this study is not intended to be understood exclusively as the precise construction יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים. Rather, the term will be used in an inclusive way to refer to the notion of the fear of God in general, albeit with a particular focus on the cases where the lexeme ירא is used in conjunction with the divine. This focus on the lexeme ירא can be justified with reference to the religious importance of this lexeme to the HB in general but also to the wisdom literature in particular – an importance which is also reflected in the scholarly works discussed in this article. To this end, the expression "the fear of God" is more appropriate for the purposes of this study than, say, "the fear of the Lord."

[2]   The research presented here is a condensed version of the first and second chapters of my MDiv mini–thesis completed during the first semester of 2013 at the University of Stellenbosch under the supervision of Professor Hendrik Bosman. To him I owe many thanks for his guidance and for encouraging me to write this article. For a more comprehensive treatment of the ideas presented in this article, see my unpublished thesis, Ettienne Ellis "'The Fear of God' in Job 37:14–24 and Qohelet 3:1–17 in the Light of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*" (M.Div. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2013), available at the University of Stellenbosch Theology Library. The final form of this article also benefitted from the comments of two unknown adjudicators.

tive neglect.[3] This renewed interest in the wisdom literature can be ascribed in no small part to the recognition of the legitimate religious[4] character of these writings on the basis of the theme of creation.[5] But this does not mean that the theme of creation is the only legitimate point of entry into the religious character of the wisdom literature, nor does Perdue or other scholars imply such a notion. A review of the existing literature on the wisdom writings shows a definite interest in another theme that clearly reveals the religious character of wisdom, namely the use of the expression "the fear of God." The importance of the fear of God has also been confirmed by Coetzee and Van Deventer who, in applying the criteria of Osborne,[6] come to the conclusion that "the fear of the Lord" can indeed be considered to be a central notion in the wisdom literature of the HB.[7]

Most research on the wisdom literature in recent times has been revolved around the delineation of conceptual views of these texts[8] and, although Perdue calls attention to the importance of the social history of wisdom for a greater understanding of wisdom and wisdom theology,[9] this study nevertheless proceeds from the viewpoint that there is still a great deal of work to be done on the conceptual views of the wisdom literature.[10] This article will attempt to discern the extent to which Rudolf Otto's points of view in his seminal work *Das Heilige*,[11] specifically the idea of "the holy" as the *mysterium tremendum*, influenced scholarly opinions on the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the HB. This will be limited to a review of selected seminal works and recent articles from theological dictionaries on the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the HB in general and the wisdom literature in particular.

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[3]   Leo Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 15–17.

[4]   In this study the term "religious" will be preferred to the term "theological" seeing as the term "religion" is more anthropologically focused than the term "theology."

[5]   See Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 15–36.

[6]   In Jaco C. J. Coetzee and Hans J. M. Van Deventer, "Die Vrees van Die Here as 'n Sentrale Begrip in Bybelse Wysheidsliteratuur," *IDS* 38/3 (2004): 504.

[7]   Coetzee & Van Deventer, "Vrees van Die Here," 513–514.

[8]   See Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 1.

[9]   Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 2.

[10]   Such research should, of course, not be conducted in ignorance of the social–historical dimensions of these texts.

[11]   Originally published in 1917. While this study took the 1923 German version, Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: uber das Irrationale in der Idee des Gottlichen und sein Verhaltnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt und Granier), into consideration, the references here will be to the English version, Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non–rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959).

B   NOTEWORTHY PERSPECTIVES FROM SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

Before proceeding to review the literature on the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the HB and attempting to offer some kind of synthesis of these views, it is important to define more precisely what this article intends in using the word "meaning." According to Riemer, the meaning of a lexeme, such as the biblical Hebrew ירא, can be understood as constituted of the following aspects:[12]

  (i)   *Sense*, that is the general meaning or concept underlying a word;

  (ii)   *Reference*, that is the object which a word stands for on a specific occasion;

 (iii)   *Denotation*, that is the entire class of objects, etc., to which an expression correctly refers to;

 (iv)   *Connotation*, that is the emotional force of a word, or anything else often associated with a certain word.[13] A word's connotation does not affect its sense, reference or denotation, but is nevertheless an important part of meaning.

Of course, while "the fear of God" is not itself a lexeme, what is intended by its meaning is highly dependent upon how the lexeme ירא is understood when used in conjunction with the divine. Though the present study is not primarily linguistic in its focus, the literature review presented here should indicate which understanding of meaning (if any) different biblical scholars attach to the fear of God in the HB.

C   LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this section of the article will be on the fear of God in the wisdom literature. But for the sake of thoroughness more generalised contributions dealing with the whole of the HB are also taken into consideration. The review will have as its key point of reference Otto's work *The Idea of the Holy* and its influence on subsequent scholarship addressing the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the HB. Before attempting to determine Otto's influence, however, it will be necessary to acquaint ourselves thoroughly with his seminal text.

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[12] Nick Riemer, *Introducing Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17–19. See also Alan Cruse, *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21–22 and John I. Saeed, *Semantics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 30–40 for similar treatments of meaning as reference and sense.

[13] Riemer, *Semantics*, 17–19 limits connotation to the emotional force of a word.

1   Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917)

Although it would be a serious mistake to take Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* as the sole influence on all subsequent contributions dealing with the notion of the fear of God, it can be affirmed that Otto has had a great impact on the understanding of the fear of God in the HB and in the wisdom literature in particular. This observation is confirmed by Appleby:

> *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), is a classic in the literature [on religious experience – E.E.], profoundly influencing the efforts of his contemporaries and successors, and still opening conceptual doors for both introductory and advanced students of religion.[14]

Otto's contribution can be summarised as follows: he first explains that religion is a phenomenon which is comprised of more than what is, strictly speaking, rational (rational meaning that which can be thought of in terms of concepts);[15] religion also has to do with non–rational phenomena such as feelings.[16] Otto coins the term "numinous" to explain the object of religious feeling, that is the experience of a special "extra" within the holy above and beyond (one could say minus) conceptions of goodness, which are only imposed secondarily upon the holy.[17] Otto further describes this numinous experience with the term *mysterium tremendum*.[18] In this regard *tremendum* can be understood as the experience of the awefulness, overpoweringness and energy of the numinous, whereas *mysterium* conveys something of the strangeness and otherness of the numinous, as well as a person's fascination with this "wholly other."[19] It is

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[14]   Peter C. Appleby, "Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology," *JSSR* 25/2 (1986): 263.

[15]   On the fundamental insight that religion has to do with more than that which is humanly speaking rational, Barth and Otto seem to be in agreement. See Lynn Poland, "The Idea of the Holy and the History of the Sublime," *JR* 72/2 (1992): 184. This is a point which, to my mind, seems to confirm the contextual nature of both scholars' work, seeing as they both attempt to contribute towards a kind of *sui generis* understanding of religion (in Barth's case, the Christian faith) within a broadly similar, very rationalistic, context.

[16]   See Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 15–18. It therefore seems quite likely that Otto's ideas were at least in part occasioned by his reaction to the excessively rational approaches of his own context. Compare Appleby, "Rudolf Otto," 263. See Adam Hood, "Faith and Fear," *ExpTim* 115/5 (2004): 146 for a similar perspective on Otto. See also Thomas F. Torrance, "Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy," *SJT* 39/4 (1986): 461–82 for a similar evaluation of Western theology.

[17]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 19–25. In the words of James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), 54–55, "In order to isolate the holy from either ethical or theological conceptions, Otto coined the word *numinous* to describe this uniquely religious phenomenon."

[18]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 26.

[19]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 27–53.

especially important to recognise the idea of the dual character of numinous consciousness, with the *tremendum* as the aspect of the experience of the numinous which repels because of the daunting character of the numinous or an element of genuine fearfulness in numinous experience, and the *fascinosum* as the wonderful and alluring aspect of the experience of the numinous which draws a person towards it.[20]

The finer nuances of Otto's understanding of the *tremendum* are also important here. First of all, according to Otto, *tremor* – as the "natural" emotion of fear – is to be understood simply as an analogy to what is meant by the numinous experience of the *tremendum* – *tremendum* is, in other words, something more and quite different from fear proper.[21] The English word "awe," according to Otto, comes closest to what is meant.[22]

A second important point to take note of is that Otto thinks of the *tremendum* as something which can exist in a crude, primitive form ("daemonic dread") as well as a higher, more developed form in which the overwhelming experience of *tremendum* is tempered by the *fascinosum*.[23] In ch. 8 of his book this judgement is also made with explicit reference to the HB.[24]

It thus seems as though Otto's idea of the *mysterium tremendum* cannot be considered to be entirely compatible with any of the broader understandings, mentioned in section B above, of what meaning entails. The experience of the numinous is, according to Otto, definitely not a concept, neither is it a thing or emotion that can simply be referred to (although the experience itself does point towards the numinous), nor is it simply an emotional or moral extra to what is normally understood by the idea of the holy. Indeed, according to Otto, numinous experience can never be grasped or explained, and although this may be attempted by means of analogy, no analogy comes even close to the experience of the real thing. This might already suggest a certain incompatibility between Otto's views and intentions and the purposes of biblical scholarship after Otto: Otto did not attempt to explain what the fear of God meant or how it should be understood, but rather used the idea of the fear of God to explain something else.

2   The Fear of God in Scholarly Research after Otto

The aim of this literature review will be to investigate the extent to which subsequent scholarly research into the fear of God in the HB agrees with and/or

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[20]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 45.
[21]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 27.
[22]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 28. In the German version of his book Otto also explicitly mentions this English word.
[23]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 30.
[24]   Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 87.

diverges from Otto's views in order to attain some general idea of the extent and nature of his influence. The review offered here is not intended to be exhaustive, but will focus on selected seminal works on the meaning of the fear of God in the HB in general and the wisdom literature in particular;[25] it will end with a consideration of how these ideas have developed into a kind of general consensus as evinced in biblical dictionaries as well as in David Clines's critique on this consensus.[26]

2a   Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (1935)

Otto's influence is clearly discernible in Walther Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*.[27] Eichrodt's views on the meaning of the fear of God show a remarkable degree of correspondence with those of Otto; Eichrodt is especially able to hold Otto's complex ideas together by strongly emphasising the aspect of *tremendum* without losing sight of the *mysterium* or a person's *fascinosum* with the divine. A salient theme in Eichrodt's discussion is that while humans fear God, they nevertheless depend on the very same being for help.[28] This is because of the covenant which exists (or came to exist) between God and humans.[29] According to Eichrodt, the covenant, then, made possible a transformation in the meaning of the fear of God, whereby numinous terror changed into a reverential awe in which trust predominates.[30] This eventually also laid the foundation for the aspects of the fear of God in which it is associated with or understood as obedience, whether it be motivated by a positive relationship of trust between God and humans,[31] or by a negative fear of punishment.[32]

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[25]   To the scholarly works discussed here it would, of course, be possible to add many more. For a discussion of additional relevant scholarly works, see for instance Eric Englemann, "Does Fear Remain in the Old Testament יראת יהוה" (Ph.D diss., Universität Wien, 2009), 40–130.

[26]   David Clines, "'The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom' (Job 28:28): A Semantic and Contextual Study," in *Job 28: Cognition in Context* (ed. Ellen Van Wolde Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2003), 57–92.

[27]   The three volumes by Walther Eichrodt were originally published from 1933 to 1939 under the title *Theologie Des Alten Testaments*. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (3 vols.; Stuttgart: Ehrenfried Klotz / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933-1939). This study made use of the English version of vol. 2. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (vol. 2; London: SCM Press, 1967), originally published in 1935.

[28]   Eichrodt, *Theology*, 270.

[29]   Eichrodt, *Theology*, 270.

[30]   Eichrodt, *Theology*, 271.

[31]   Eichrodt, *Theology*, 272–276, 290.

[32]   Eichrodt, *Theology*, 313.

2b   Siegfried Plath, *Furcht Gottes* (1962)

An influential monograph[33] which focused exclusively on the notion of the fear of God in the HB was Siegfried Plath's *Furcht Gottes*.[34] After an extensive review of the occurrence of the lexeme ירא in the HB, Plath expresses the opinion that the lexeme underwent a semantic development from simply conveying the emotion of fear to a term with a certain ambivalence, seeing as it no longer simply expresses fear but also submission to and worship of the deity.[35] As such the lexeme came to be used as a technical term for the right relationship to God,[36] a meaning which was taken over by the Deuteronomistic writings, the wisdom literature and the Psalms, albeit with a distinctive focus in the different textual groupings: In the Deuteronomistic writings the expression is used with a special focus on the law and obedience to the law; in the wisdom literature it used to convey primarily a moral meaning; and finally the Psalms place greater emphasis on the experience of God's might.[37]

The value of Plath's work is that it demonstrates the diverse ways in which the lexeme ירא is used in the HB and that the expression evidently can have different nuances in meaning. However, while Plath has clearly been influenced by Otto, he nevertheless goes further by relating Otto's views on the *tremendum* and the *fascinosum* to the HB along a line of development from "normal" fear to something corresponding to what Otto asserted, but also something more than that. This "more" relates specifically to Plath's understanding the fear of God as signifying the right relationship to God, together with its more specific meanings. In other words, where Otto used the notion of "fear" as analogous to the *sui generis* experience of the numinous, Plath explains how the lexeme ירא came to be associated with numinous experience and undergo even further semantic developments.

2c   Joachim Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (1965)

Another comprehensive contribution towards an understanding of the fear of God in the HB is *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* by Joachim Becker.[38] While Becker's fundamental insights and categories of meaning largely correspond to those of Plath, he does contribute significantly to the understanding of the fear of God on the basis of linguistic analysis by categorising it more precisely

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[33]   As far as I am aware Berend Oosterhoff, *De vreze des Heren in het Oude Testament* (Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1949) is the first monograph on the fear of God. For the limited purposes of this article Oosterhoff's views will, however, not be discussed.
[34]   Siegfried Plath, *Furcht Gottes* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1962).
[35]   Plath, *Furch Gottes*, 122–124.
[36]   Plath, *Furch Gottes*, 124.
[37]   Plath, *Furch Gottes*, 124–125.
[38]   Joachim Becker, *Gottesfurcht Im Alten Testament* (Rome: Päpstliches Bibelinstitut, 1965).

according to its cultic, moral and nomistic uses. Of these categorisations, the cultic use is associated especially with the Deuteronomistic strands of the HB, and can be understood as loyalty to God and the honouring and praising of God within a cultic context in which such loyalty is presupposed.[39] The moral use, on the other hand, is to be understood as living in accordance with God's moral will.[40] Lastly, the nomistic use, associated in particular with the wisdom traditions of the HB, differs from the cultic and moral uses of the fear of God in that in the post–exilic period the law became authoritative in itself (i.e. it was no longer simply the grounds for the covenant) and came to be associated much more closely with God's moral will than was the case in earlier times.[41]

The above developments, according to Becker, derive from a differentiation which can be made between the genuine fear of God ("Gottesschrecken") and the numinous fear of God ("Numinose Furcht").[42] This development furthermore rests on the premises that numinous fear came to be used as an expression for human beings' relationship to the divine and consequently also to the system of religion, and also that the character of numinous fear is not something that is purely negative but also has a significant positive dimension in the notion of the *fascinosum*.[43] This, then, led to the cultic and moral uses of the fear of God, the last of which also gave rise to the development of the nomistic use of the expression.[44]

Thus, again, while Becker clearly shows influence from Otto, his use of Otto's ideas largely corresponds to Plath's use of Otto's ideas. Whereas Otto used the notion of "fear" simply as an analogy for the *sui generis* experience of the numinous, Becker, like Plath, explains how the lexeme ירא came to be associated with numinous experience and undergo even further semantic developments.

2d   Louis Derousseaux, *La crainte de Dieu dans l'Ancien Testament* (1970)

To the above monographs on the meaning of the fear of God in the HB one can add a third, namely *La crainte de Dieu dans l'Ancien Testament* by Louis Derousseaux.[45] The chronological framework of Derousseaux's work, moving from the earliest sources, to the Deuteronomistic writings, to the prophetic writings and eventually the wisdom literature, confirms Nielsen's judgement

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[39]   Becker, *Gottesfurcht*, 123–124, 160–161, 183.
[40]   Becker, *Gottesfurcht*, 209, 261.
[41]   Becker, *Gottesfurcht*, 282–283.
[42]   Becker, *Gottesfurcht*, 66.
[43]   Becker, *Gottesfurcht*, 75.
[44]   Becker, *Gottesfurcht*, 16–77, 84.
[45]   Louis Derousseaux, *La Crainte de Dieeu Dans l'Ancien Testament* (Paris: Cerf, 1970).

that Derousseaux attempts to illustrate the precise development of the meaning of the fear of God.[46] Against this background, a salient feature of Derousseaux's work is that he attempted to escape the kind of very generalised and abstract understanding of "fear" as evinced in Otto and rather attempted to link the feeling with its representation against the background of the historical developments of kingship, covenant and wisdom.[47] In this regard notions such as the orderly and just rule of the cosmos (kingship), acknowledging the absolute sovereignty of YHWH (covenant) and behaviour according to certain moral standards (wisdom) are of the utmost importance.[48]

2e   Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (1970)

At more or less the same time as the three comprehensive works mentioned above came Gerhard von Rad's less comprehensive, though no less important, *Wisdom in Israel*.[49] Von Rad devotes a whole chapter to the fear of God under the section of his book dealing with the liberation of reason. He agrees with Plath and Becker that the fear of God seemingly had a wide range of possible meanings, and he highlights those aspects of meaning relating to obedience to, commitment to, and knowledge of YHWH.[50] More than the aforementioned contributions, however, Von Rad emphasises the significance of the fear of God as being reflective of the religious framework of wisdom and therefore the impossibility for the sages to consider their experience and knowledge as something apart from their faith in YHWH.[51] This relates especially to the idea that, while valid rules could be discerned by the human subject, divine activity[52] could call these very same rules into question, thus giving rise to a remarkable dialectic between the possibilities and limits of wisdom – a dialectic made possible by the fear of God as both the grounding principle of wisdom and the recognition of its limits by virtue of the freedom and power of YHWH.[53]

It should be noted, however, that Von Rad does not seem to find Otto's work of much interest for his understanding of the meaning and importance of the fear of God. Be that as it may, Von Rad's views on the ultimate mystery of

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[46]   Kirsten Nielsen, "Fear of God: Old Testament," *RPP* 5: 74.

[47]   Derousseaux, *La Crainte*, 11, 64–66.

[48]   Derousseaux, *La Crainte*, 64–66, 255–257, 356–357.

[49]   The original study by Von Rad was published in 1970. See Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970). This present study makes use of the English version. See Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972).

[50]   Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 66.

[51]   Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 63–64.

[52]   See also Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 349 for a brief discussion on texts stressing divine freedom and activity "of which Von Rad has made a great deal."

[53]   Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 106–109.

divine activity and creation, and the important role of the fear of God in this regard, nevertheless show an interesting point of connection with Otto's views on the *mysterium* – contrary to other works that relate the fear of God primarily to the *tremendum*.

2f   Henri Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom" (1977)

Some of the most noteworthy contributions to the understanding of the fear of God in the HB published after the works discussed above are a series of scholarly articles. Chronologically the first of these is Henri Blocher's article "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom."[54] In essence, Blocher argues that the word רֵאשִׁית in Prov 1:7 should be understood as "principle," meaning that the fear of the Lord is the grounding theoretical principle on which all wisdom is based.[55] It thus appears that Blocher attempts to ground wisdom thoroughly within religion as its theoretical basis, understanding "fear" to mean essentially the same thing as "piety" against the background of Otto's and especially Derousseaux's work.[56]

2g   Michael Barré, "'Fear of God' and the World View of Wisdom" (1981)

As the title of the article suggests, Barré attempts to take the broader ancient Near Eastern context of biblical wisdom seriously.[57] In short, Barré makes the argument that the notion of the fear of the gods should be understood against a cultic background. This means that humans recognise the order of the world as determined by the gods and therefore do not simply revere the gods inwardly, but also engage in the appropriate cultic (and other) actions in accordance with, and as expressions of, their inward reverence.[58] Those who did not "fear" the gods with the appropriate attitude and more importantly the appropriate actions disregarded the prerogatives of the gods and could then expect that things would not go their way.[59]

Barré's short article makes a strong argument for the case that the fear of God should be understood not only as an inward attitude or feeling but espe-

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[54]   Henri Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom," *TynBul* 28/1 (1977): 3–28.

[55]   Blocher, "Fear of the Lord," 14–15.

[56]   See, for instance Blocher, "Fear of the Lord," 10, 19. Although an interpretation such as Blocher's may possibly be fitting for the first chapters of the Book of Proverbs as well as certain other texts of the HB, it is unlikely that this line of thinking will be able to adequately make sense of all the occurrences of the fear of God in the HB.

[57]   Michael L. Barré, "Fear of God and the World View of Wisdom," *BTB* 11/2 (1981): 41.

[58]   Barré, "Fear of God," 41–43.

[59]   Barré, "Fear of God," 41–43.

cially also as outward actions and behaviour. Although not in total disagreement with Otto,[60] this article can nevertheless be understood as diverging from Otto's primary points of view.

2h   Lindsay Wilson, "The Book of Job and the Fear of God" (1995)

While most contributions assume the importance of the notion of the fear of God in the wisdom literature, in this article Wilson argues that the book of Job qualifies (even marginalises) the notion that the fear of God is somehow connected to wisdom understood in the sense of retribution (cause and effect).[61] The notion of the fear of God did not provide answers or solutions to the kind of problems which Job faced,[62] and it therefore must be the case "that the totality of wise living cannot be subsumed under the 'fear of the Lord' concept."[63]

While offering an excellent discussion on the inadequacies of a certain traditional view on the meaning of the fear of God, Wilson's article nevertheless begs the question of how the notion should be understood. Does the author of Job simply hold up the traditional understanding in order to qualify or even marginalise it, or does the fear of God also come to signify something more? In her article, which addresses similar questions to those raised by Wilson, Samantha Joo offers the interesting interpretation that the book of Job challenges the cause and effect god–image grounded in the *tremendum* in favour of a god–image in which *tremendum* is complemented by *mysterium*.[64] So while Wilson asserts that "Wisdom is a wider category than 'the fear of the Lord,'"[65] it might also be fruitful to consider the possibility that the fear of God/the Lord is a wider category than simply cause and effect.[66]

2i   Recent Theological Dictionaries and the Critique by David Clines (2003)

Having reviewed some of the most noteworthy contributions on the meaning of the fear of God in the HB, it is now possible to consider theological dictionaries to ascertain what kind of general consensus has emerged from these diverse contributions. The dictionaries considered for the purposes of this study are

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[60]   See Barré's reference to Otto: Barré, "Fear of God," 42: "It [the fear of the gods – E.E.] does not convey the notion of enervating terror but rather of overpowering awe in the presence of the wholly other."

[61]   Lindsay Wilson, "The Book of Job and the Fear of God," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46/1 (1995): 59–79. See in particular page 77.

[62]   Wilson, "Book of Job," 73.

[63]   Wilson, "Book of Job," 77.

[64]   Samantha Joo, "Job, the Biblical Atlas," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74/1 (2012): 81–82.

[65]   Wilson, "Book of Job," 78.

[66]   Joo, "Job," 81–82. The same is suggested by Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 106–109, albeit in different terms.

TDOT, DOT, RPP, NIDOTTE and *NIDB*. All of the dictionaries reviewed recognise the potential of the lexeme ירא to convey a range of different meanings, often explicitly understood as a semantic development.[67] The dictionaries furthermore consider it possible that the fear of God may mean nothing more or less than sheer terror before the divine, although divine fear is most extensively described along the lines of Otto's idea of the *mysterium tremendum* (which need not exclude the element of genuine fear) and categories reminiscent of those of the contributions mentioned above, especially Becker as well as the more "intellectual" understanding of fear evinced in contributions such as that of Blocher.[68]

Of all the dictionaries reviewed, it is only Longman in *DOT* who makes the distinction between what he calls "positive fear" (awe, worship, etc.) and "negative fear" (genuine fear or terror) central to the discussion.[69] Although texts such as Prov 1:7 seem to imply a positive notion of fear, the possibility of "negative fear" arises rather strongly especially in the wisdom books of Job and Qohelet, often resulting in a disagreement among scholars on the meaning of the fear of God in specific texts.[70]

A scholar who argues strongly in favour of the meaning of "negative" fear, not only in specific texts but indeed in general, is David Clines. In a two–part essay Clines deals first with the general argument and then with the specific text of Job 28:28.[71] He starts off by reviewing occurrences of the lexeme ירא in non–religious contexts in which it clearly refers to the emotion of fear.[72] Moving then to the use of the lexeme in religious context, Clines remarks,

> It is somewhat surprising therefore to discover on reading the lexica and textbooks a well–nigh universal agreement that, broadly speaking, when God is the object of ירא or when the fear of God is mentioned, there is no reference to any emotion experienced by the person but rather (a) their attitude of respect or reverence toward the deity and/or (b) their ethical behaviour.[73]

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[67]   Hans F. Fuhs, "יָרֵא," *TDOT* 6 יָתַר-יוֹבֵל: 298; Tremper Longman, "Fear of the Lord," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman and Peter E. Enns; Downers Grove: Inter–Varsity Press, 2008), 201; Nielsen, "Fear of God," 74; Miles V. van Pelt and Walter C. Kaiser, "ירא," *NIDOTTE* 2: 528; Harold, C. Washington, "Fear," in *NID* 2: 438.

[68]   See Fuhs, "יָרֵא," 298–315; Nielsen, "Fear of God," 74–75; Van Pelt and Kaiser, "ירא," 528–533; Washington, "Fear," 438–441.

[69]   Longman, "Fear," 201–205.

[70]   Longman, "Fear," 204 only mentions disagreement among scholars concerning the meaning of the fear of God with regards to Qohelet.

[71]   Clines, "'Fear of the Lord,'" 57–92.

[72]   Clines, "'Fear of the Lord,'" 59–61.

[73]   Clines, "'Fear of the Lord,'" 62.

While Clines is, "broadly speaking" correct, he does seem to skew the evidence a little in his favour. The dictionaries as well as other influential works do as a rule at least consider the possibility of genuine fear. That being said, Clines's comment above should not be understood in the abstract, but against the background of a strong emphasis on the *tremendum*, on the one hand, and a suspicion concerning the idea of a semantic development in the meaning of the lexeme ירא, on the other hand.[74] The notion of meanings besides that of genuine fear is, after all, based on the premise that the expression has undergone at least some form of semantic development. Clines does not seem to have a problem with ways of relating to the divine other than fear. Rather it seems simply to be the case that he considers the fear of God to convey nothing other than that, namely fear. For him, "Otto is clear that fear is an emotion, and that attraction or fascination is another."[75] To sum up Clines's argument, he writes,

> My conclusion is that the ירא word group always signifies the emotion of fear (which is its sense or denotation), but that sometimes that emotion leads to actions (or the avoidance of actions) of an ethical or cultic kind (which are then its reference or connotation). In brief, when people do not lie, for example, because of the "fear of God," it does not mean that they do not lie because they behave ethically but because they are afraid of God and the consequences he might exact of them for lying.[76]

Clines should be commended for treating "meaning" as a linguistic (semantic) category. One should, however, be wary of Clines's crystal–clear understanding of an expression of which the meaning is, at least to my mind, quite uncertain. Firstly, Clines's understanding of semantic terms is problematic. For Clines, sense = denotation and reference = connotation. Semantic textbooks, however, rather associate reference with the thing for which a word stands on a specific occasion, denotation with the entire collection of possible referents that a word may have, sense with a word's general meaning, mental representation or the concept underlying the word, and connotation with a word's emotive

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[74]   Clines, "'Fear of the Lord,'" 62, 64. Clines also seems to have been particularly influenced by the views of Samuel Terrien as expressed in his dictionary article, "Fear," that "It would be a grave error . . . to soften the meaning of the expression ['fear of the Lord'] and ignore its central element of *mysterium tremendum*. . . [T]he fear of the Lord is not merely to be equated with reverence, piety or religion because it is impossible today to revaluate and again charge these terms with their ancient – but now largely lost – connotation of awesomeness." See Samuel Terrien, "Fear," *IDB* 2:258, as quoted in Clines, "'Fear of the Lord,'" 62.

[75]   Clines, "'Fear of the Lord,'" 62.

[76]   Clines, "'Fear of the Lord,'" 64.

force, or other things associated with a word, but not at all affecting its sense, reference or denotation.[77]

Secondly, even Otto, on whom Clines claims to base his views, allowed some room for development in peoples' numinous consciousness.[78] Also, the meanings of words very often do change.[79] The categories that different scholars use to explain the semantic development of the lexeme ירא correspond specifically to two of the traditional categories used to explain semantic change, namely specialisation and ameliorisation (that is, a "positive" change in meaning).[80]

There is, therefore, no reason to reject out of hand, as Clines seems to be doing, the possibility of a positive or specialised development in the meaning of the fear of God that goes beyond mere connotation. That being said, Clines's views should also not be evaluated too harshly. A strong critique of what is commonly accepted as true is often what is necessary to provide the impetus for re–examining ideas that have for too long remained unexamined.[81] The fact that a scholar such as Longman, writing his dictionary article several years after Clines's contribution, strongly recognises the possibility of "negative" fear serves as excellent proof of precisely this point.[82] Besides, Clines is not so much rejecting the fundamental insights of the consensus view as attempting to arrange these insights in a new way, so that the emotion of genuine fear takes primacy over the alternative or additional meanings accepted in the consensual view.

D   SYNTHESIS

Broadly speaking the contributions reviewed above explicate the different meanings of the fear of God in the HB according to the following basic categories which, according to the literature, can occur in different combinations within different contexts. First of all, "fear" can clearly be an experience or emotion which amounts either to genuine fear and possibly also a special kind of reverential or numinous awe. Secondly, this first and most basic meaning is to be distinguished from a more specialised use of the word in which it becomes associated with attitudes and actions, specifically cultic, moral or obedient action (obedient specifically to rules or laws). Thirdly, and this relates especially to wisdom texts such as Prov 1:7, the fear of God, probably in one or

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[77] Cruse, *Meaning in Language*, 21–22; Riemer, *Semantics*, 17–19; Saeed, *Semantics*, 24, 32.
[78] Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 29–32, 87.
[79] Riemer, *Semantics*, 372.
[80] Riemer, *Semantics*, 373–375.
[81] Indeed Clines's article and the views expressed in it were among the primary motivations for the present study.
[82] Longman, "Fear," 201–205.

more of the above meanings, is somehow related to wisdom.[83] While the exact way in which the fear of God might be related to wisdom is by no means certain, it seems possible to construe from the literature that this relation can be explained either in terms of a recognition of the order underlying creation, indicating a certain predictability in and trustworthiness of the divine rule of the cosmos and living accordingly, or in terms of a recognition of the mystery underlying creation, implying a freedom of divine activity and the divine rule of the cosmos and living accordingly. Or possibly both forms of recognition.[84, 85]

The above account, of course, does not adequately explain the varying potential meanings of the lexeme ירא according to semantic (linguistic) categories, or how it came to be that this particular word came to have these potential meanings according to formal linguistic criteria. What should be clear, however, is that Otto's points of view in *The Idea of the Holy* were by no means the only influence on scholarly understanding of the meaning of the fear of God in the HB. Otto's ideas were most certainly influential and found to be useful, but scholars were nevertheless compelled also to make sense of what they found in the biblical text itself. The result of this dynamic seems to have been the postulation of potential meanings for the fear of God that were shaped by Otto's views, but more importantly also guided by a competent analysis of the different nuances which the fear of God takes on in the biblical text itself.

Finally, this brings us back to what was said about Otto's views earlier in this article. The fact that Otto's understanding of numinous experience is incompatible with all of the categories of meaning outlined in section B necessarily means that his views cannot be accepted – nor indeed were they accepted by the majority of scholars after Otto – as a final explanation of the meaning of the fear of God in the HB. Otto did not attempt to explain finally what the fear

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[83]   See Ted Hildebrandt, "Justifying the Fear of the Lord" (paper presented at the meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, 18 November 2010), 1–13, for a cognitive linguistic perspective on the different meanings of the fear of God. Hildebrandt identifies several meanings for the fear of God that fit into the generalized categories offered above.

[84]   For a truly profound perspective in this regard, see Hendrik Bosman, "Being Wise Betwixt Order and Mystery: Keeping the Commandments and Fearing the Lord," *Scriptura* 111/1 (2012): 438, "The study of wisdom literature in the Old Testament poses the challenge to mediate a hermeneutical balance between order (causality of deed and consequence) and mystery (the experience of divine presence in personal and cultic spheres)" – both of which can be related to the fear of God.

[85]   In explaining the above potential meanings of the fear of God, I found the phenomena of kingship, law and cult to be particularly useful. To my mind, the meaning of the fear of God can best be understood by taking into account the whole way of living and understanding the world out of which it came. See Ellis, "'The Fear of God,'" 24–27.

of God meant or how it should be understood, and neither did (the majority of) critical scholarship after Otto understand his work as if this had been its intention. Rather, Otto used the idea of the fear of God in order to explain something else and by so doing offered remarkable insights into the human experience of the divine. Scholarship after Otto clearly found these insights useful in attempting to get a grip on the meaning of the fear of God in the HB, but they were nevertheless also compelled by the biblical text to go beyond that which Otto asserted.

E   CONCLUSION

This article has explored the conceptual views of the wisdom literature by reconsidering the meaning of the fear of God in the light of Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. It was suggested that his contribution should be understood against the background of the particular context (that is historical, cultural, philosophical etc.) out of which it originated. Against this background, it was found that Otto's most valuable contribution lay in taking seriously those elements in religion which are not strictly speaking rational and have to do rather with religious feeling, specifically a kind of very direct and immediate experience of the divine. While Otto's contribution was in many ways genuinely novel, it was also subject to certain influences on his own understanding of religion and religious experience.

Investigating scholarly research into the meaning of the fear of God in the HB in general and the wisdom literature in particular in the light of Otto's contribution, it was found that Otto did indeed have a great influence on the understanding of the fear of God, evident in particular in the way in which subsequent (German) contributions and more recent theological dictionaries make use of his ideas in order to explicate the meaning of the expression. It was also found, however, that scholars did not uncritically accept Otto's views as a final explanation of the meaning of the fear of God in the HB (indeed something that Otto did not intend anyway), but rather allowed their opinions to be shaped by Otto yet also to be guided by a competent analysis of the different nuances which the fear of God takes on in the biblical text itself. This leads to the conclusion that scholars should recognise, as indeed most have, both the possibilities and the limitations of Otto's views in any attempt to delineate the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the HB.

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