

Reconsidering the Fear of God in Job 37:14-24 and Qohelet 3:1-17 in the Light of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*¹

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ABSTRACT

This article takes further the work begun in a previous article² by investigating the notion of the fear of God in the HB in the light of Rudolf Otto's Das Heilige. The focus of this article is on the usefulness of Otto's views for understanding the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the two wisdom texts of Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17. It is argued that taking Otto's views on the mysterium tremendum into account helps to facilitate a greater appreciation of the multifaceted nature of the fear of God in these texts. Maintaining the (creative) tension in the human experience of the divine, put into words most admirably by Otto, is found to be of the importance for the interpretation of Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17 – as it may very well also be for other texts of the HB.

Key concepts: Fear of God; Rudolf Otto; *mysterium tremendum*; Job; Qohelet

A INTRODUCTION

The current article endeavours to further investigate the meaning and significance of the fear of God in the HB in the light of Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the*

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¹ The research presented here is a shortened (and reformulated) version of the third, fourth and fifth chapters of my M.Div. mini-thesis completed during the first semester of 2013 at the University of Stellenbosch under the supervision of Professor Hendrik Bosman. Without his guidance and encouragement this publication would quite simply not have seen the light of day. This article also benefitted greatly from the comments of two unknown adjudicators. For a more comprehensive treatment of the ideas presented in this article, see my unpublished thesis, Etienne Ellis, "The Fear of God' in Job 37:14-24 and Qohelet 3:1-17 in the Light of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*," (M.Div.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 reader is also asked to note that for references to Otto and his work, this article subsumes much of the work done in the previous article.

² Etienne Ellis, "Reconsidering the Fear of God in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible in the light of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*," *OTE* 27/1 (2014): 82-99.

Holy. The previous article pointed out that Otto did indeed have a great influence on the understanding of the fear of God, but that scholars also allowed their opinions to be guided by a competent analysis of the different nuances which the fear of God takes on in the biblical text itself. The resulting postulated potential meanings were summarised according to the categories of 1) feelings which amount either to genuine fear and possibly also a special kind of reverential or numinous awe; 2) attitudes and actions, specifically cultic, moral or obedient action (obedient specifically to rules or laws); and 3) a special use in which it becomes associated with wisdom either in terms of order or in terms of mystery.³ Scholars' critical engagement with the views of Otto, on the one hand, and the biblical text, on the other hand, led to the conclusion that scholars should take care to recognise 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. In other words, the works of the scholars reviewed in the previous article suggests that Otto's points of views should not be uncritically accepted (as if they represent the final word on the fear of God in the HB), nor should they be simply ignored or rejected (as if they have nothing more to offer for better understanding the fear of God in the HB). Otto's views remain conceptually useful, but the fear of God in the HB should always be understood with due consideration of its own ways of relating to and speaking about the divine.

As the previous article was mainly concerned with selected seminal perspectives on the fear of God and Otto's possible influence on the conception of the fear of God offered in these works, it did not itself investigate specific texts of the HB in order to ascertain whether Otto's views indeed still have any insights to offer for our understanding of the fear of God, or not. The aim of the current article, then, will be to investigate the notion of the fear of God in the texts of Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17 in the light of Otto's work. These two texts show, on the basis of their vocabulary, a seeming correspondence with Otto's views on the *mysterium tremendum*. In both texts the notion of not being able to find / understand (לֹא מֵצֵא) stands in close proximity to the notion of fearing God (יִרָא) – a seeming correspondence that should prove fruitful grounds for a consideration of the usefulness of Otto's views for understanding the fear of God in the biblical text.⁴

³ As stated in the previous article, Ted Hildebrandt, "Justifying the Fear of the Lord" (paper presented at the meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, 18 November 2010), 1-13 offers a very important cognitive linguistic perspective on the different meanings of the fear of God. Hildebrandt identifies several meanings of the fear of God that fit into the generalised categories offered above.

⁴ If Otto's views can indeed be of importance for understanding the fear of God in Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17, a brief contextualisation of his views in terms of theory of religion is in order. Broadly speaking, Otto's work can be described as phenome-

B JOB 37:14-24

1 Exegetical Remarks on Job 37:14-24

In order to fully appreciate both the possibilities and limitations of Otto's views to arrive at a better understanding of the meaning and significance of the fear of God in Job 37:14-24, some brief exegetical remarks are in order.⁵

Speaking in broad terms there is a consensus in contemporary scholarship that the book of Job concerns itself with the moral order of creation, which includes exploring the validity of the principle of retribution.⁶ At the risk of gross generalisation, the following may be said about the characters in the book: the character of Job clearly asserts that the principle of retribution has not been upheld in his case, and protests in the strongest terms that this principle should be upheld. Job's three friends affirm the principle of retribution and therefore conclude that Job must be guilty. Depending on how one interprets his speeches, Elihu, the character speaking in Job 37:14-24, offers an affirmation but also a kind of transformation of the principle. Finally, YHWH appears to marginalise the principle, thereby opening the way for an alternative understanding of the divine, the cosmos and their relation to each other.

Though there is some strong evidence for regarding the speeches of Elihu to be secondary additions to the book of Job, Clines and Newsom are correct in asserting the importance of coming to terms with the book as we have received it and explaining the significance of Elihu's contribution, if at all

nological philosophy, concerned with the investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced. Compare Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 61. Thus for Otto *tremendum* and *mysterium* are the conscious experiences whereas the numinous is the phenomenon being experienced. For the purposes of this article it remains, however, that for Otto the notion of "fear" or "tremor" is merely analogous to the *sui generis* experience of the numinous as *tremendum*. As has already been noted in the previous article, this presents a major challenge when attempting to make sense of the fear of God in the HB in the light of 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. See Ellis, "Reconsidering," 86.

⁵ A note: The exegetical remarks offered in this article will focus on a synchronic reading of the texts. In reading the texts synchronically, an awareness of diachronic issues is presupposed. Compare Ferdinand E. Deist, *The Material Culture of the Bible: an Introduction* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 33. For a treatment of historical issues, see my thesis, Ellis, "'Fear of God,'" specifically pp. 54-58 for Job 37:14-24 and pp. 88-92 for Qoh 3:1-17. For historical comments, see also the footnotes provided with the exegetical discussions.

⁶ For an excellent treatment of the principle of retribution and related issues in the book of Job, see David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), xxxix-xlviii.

possible.⁷ The argument in favour of an appreciation of the Elihu speeches has then typically been made the grounds of Elihu's narrative importance,⁸ the dialogical character of the book of Job as a whole⁹ and/or the specific contents of his speeches.

The more positive interpretations of the contents of Elihu's speeches are particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this article. Such approaches typically understand him as broadening the meaning of suffering to something which is not solely grounded in retribution, but something which has a wider, disciplinary function. An early proponent of this kind of approach was Marvin Pope.¹⁰ A more recent contribution of this kind is that of David Clines. Clines stresses that Elihu considers suffering to be a revelatory experience, that is to say, suffering is a way of communicating divine displeasure and putting right that which is wrong (in other words, discipline).¹¹

According to the above line of interpretation, it would seem as though Elihu attempts to uphold the moral purposefulness of creation and of divine activity (*contra* Job) without giving in to a narrow dogma of retribution (*contra* the three friends), yet at the same time not denying its validity and God's just governance of the world (*contra* the divine speeches?).¹² Job's very response of rebelliously asserting his own righteousness as opposed to that of God provides, according to this line of interpretation, the grounds for Elihu's explanation for what has happened to him, not only in terms of the act of rebelling, which must be punished / disciplined,¹³ but also in terms of Job's underlying attitude which made his reaction possible in the first place.¹⁴

⁷ See, for instance, Clines, *Job 1-20*, lvii, as well as Carol A. Newsom, "Job," *NIB* 4: 558-559.

⁸ See, for example, Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 25-27.

⁹ See Carol A. Newsom "Dialogue and Allegorical Hermeneutics in Job 28:28," in *Job 28 Cognition in Context* (ed. Ellen van Wolde; Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2003), 299. See also her more comprehensive contribution in Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job a Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Marvin H. Pope, *Job: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1965), xxvii.

¹¹ Clines, *Job 1-20*, xli-xlii.

¹² Samuel E. Balentine, *Job* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 617.

¹³ According to David J. A. Clines, *Job 21-37* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 786.

¹⁴ John H. Walton, "Job 1: Book Of," *DOT:WPW*: 338-339. The notion that the speeches of Elihu seek to elucidate the disciplinary purpose (or at least potential) of suffering needs, of course, to be balanced with the rest of the book. From the prologue and concluding sections of the book we hear that Job was in the right. If anything, his sufferings were caused by his own righteous character, which provided the impetus for the wager between YHWH and "the satan," and not through any fault of his own.

If the above interpretation of the speeches of Elihu specifically as they relate to the question concerning the moral order of the cosmos – namely that Elihu attempts to uphold the moral purposefulness of creation and of divine activity without giving in to a narrow dogma of retribution, yet at the same time not denying its validity and God's just governance of the world – is accepted as an accurate interpretation,¹⁵ then it would be interesting to see how Elihu argues in favour of these concerns in the specific text of Job 37:14-24.¹⁶

In the first part of the pericope, vv. 14-18, Elihu directs Job's attention to the "wonders" of God. Here he seems to be underscoring Job's ignorance and lack of ability compared to God.¹⁷ While this clearly has to do with highlighting Job's inadequate capacities compared to God (v. 18, "Can you hammer out the skies with him" – obviously Job cannot), I would suggest that it possibly also has to do with Job's ignorance of God's purposeful timing of the happenings of nature. Verses 15-17 could possibly be understood as being concerned with Job's lack of recognition of God's purposeful timing of *when* (and why) God arranges his clouds¹⁸ and not simply his ignorance of *how* God does these things.¹⁹ By implication, then, Elihu could be said to be arguing in these

¹⁵ Of course the significance of the speeches of Elihu relates to more than only the moral order of the cosmos. As one of the unknown adjudicators of this article mentioned, Elihu maintains that wisdom is mediated by the divine spirit (cf. Job 32:8; 18-19). Without this divine spirit or revelation, according to Elihu, it is impossible obtain wisdom and therefore a true perspective of the divine role in creation.

¹⁶ Concerning the demarcation of the pericope, this article agrees with the demarcation proposed by Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991), 256-257 and Clines, *Job 21-37*, 808, 847. For a thorough treatment of why this is considered the preferred demarcation, see my unpublished thesis, Ellis, "Fear of God," 34-37. Furthermore, the Hebrew of these verses is quite difficult and possibly even textually corrupt. For detailed analysis of the text, see Ellis, "Fear of God," 37-47.

¹⁷ This line of interpretation is put forward especially by Leo Perdue in two contributions, namely Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 157 and Leo Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 130.

¹⁸ The use of the word עֲלֵיָהֶם in v. 16 is taken to be a textual corruption by Clines, *Job 21-37*, 844. According to the interpretation offered in this article, however, the word could be understood as meaning "about" or "concerning." As such it could refer to God's wonders more generally or the wonder of the clouds in particular. In this regard this article agrees generally with the interpretations offered by Habel, *Job*, 497 and John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 481.

¹⁹ It is specifically Clines, *Job 21-37*, 881 who interprets Elihu as being concerned with the morally purposeful timing of the happenings of nature. This interpretation is confirmed more generally by Balentine, *Job*, 617. Though Clines offers this interpretation primarily with regard to vv. 16-17, I argued in my unpublished thesis that v. 15 could be understood in a similar way, seeing that the הַ+infinitive construction, as the one used in this verse (הַשִּׁיר), typically has a temporal meaning. For my argument see

verses in favour of the ultimate moral purposefulness of the events within creation, including what happened to Job.

Verses 19-20 shift the train of thought with ironical, even sarcastic, remarks about how Job can possibly expect to challenge the deity responsible for the wonders of the previous verses. Verses 21-22 shift the scene back to creation, implying again God’s purposeful timing of the events of nature, albeit here by dramatically contrasting God’s arranging of his clouds in vv. 15-17 with his now causing the sky to become free from clouds so that the sun is bright in the sky.²⁰

Many scholars have furthermore recognised that vv. 21-22, concerned as they are with the brightness of the sun in the sky, “gold” coming from the north and the majesty around God possibly allude to (the impending?) divine theophany.²¹ This line of interpretation is, to my mind, supported by v. 23, where a dislocation construction occurs in which the word *יָדַעַתְּ* is foregrounded “to (re)activate a referent (in this case Shaddai – E. E.) with particular attributes . . . in order to say something about it having a particular profile.”²² Thus in this verse, after his final appraisal of God’s wonders, Elihu brings his speeches to a close by underscoring God’s profile as Shaddai as the primary motivation for what he has been saying in this passage as well as for why “men” “fear” him – God as Shaddai is unfindable / unreachable by humans, exalted in power, judgement and justice, and contrary to what Job has been saying throughout the book, he does not oppress.^{23, 24}

Ellis, “Fear of God,” 41-42. For the use of the infinitive, see Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *’n Bybels-Hebreeuse Naslaangrammatika* (Stellenbosch: Hebtég Uitgewers, 1997), 118.

²⁰ Clines, *Job 21-37*, 883-884.

²¹ Consider Clines, *Job 21-37*, 884.

²² Christo H. J. van der Merwe, *An Exhaustive Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (forthcoming).

²³ On the use of *יָדַעַתְּ* in Job 37:24 see Christo H. J. van der Merwe, “The Challenge of Better Understanding Discourse Particles: The Case of *יָדַעַתְּ*,” *JNSL* 40/2 (2014): 151. According to Van der Merwe, *יָדַעַתְּ* is used here as part of a “fact reporting” statement. In other words, as has been stated above, God’s profile as Shaddai provides the grounds for why men “fear” him.

²⁴ For a discussion on what motivates Elihu’s perspectives and whether or not his views are in any way a suitable answer to the problem of Job, see my unpublished thesis, Ellis, “Fear of God,” 54-57. Saying that Elihu argues in favour of the ultimate moral purposefulness of the mighty God’s rule of his creation is not at all intended to imply that Elihu offers the final and true perspective on Job’s situation – though he definitely offers an important perspective worthy of consideration.

2 The Fear of God in Job 37:14-24 in the Light of Otto's *Das Heilige*

Following the brief exegetical remarks of the previous section, it is now possible to direct attention to the primary purpose of this article as formulated in the introduction. An appropriate place to start in seeking to determine the usefulness of Otto's views for understanding the meaning and significance of the fear of God in Job 37:14-24 would be to consider the views of other scholars.

A selective review of recent critical exegetical commentaries and other more focused works²⁵ reveals that the majority of scholars are seemingly uninterested in Otto's views on the *mysterium tremendum* for better understanding the fear of God in Job 37:14-24. Of the scholars reviewed, only one, namely David Clines, makes a direct reference to Otto's views on this. Clines, however, relates "fear" in wisdom to psychological fear in its most direct sense, which is not entirely sensitive to the finer nuances in Otto's views on a special, numinous awe. Another, Carol Newsom, also mentions the idea of the numinous. Newsom does not elaborate, however, on the significance of Otto's views for this passage. The relatively cursory treatment of Otto's views in Clines and Newsom in conjunction with the lack of direct reference to Otto's views in other contributions does seem to suggest that his views were not found to be particularly useful for elucidating the meaning and significance of the fear of God in this passage.

Rather than emphasising Otto's views on the *mysterium tremendum* for understanding the fear of God in this passage, scholars instead emphasise other factors.²⁶ All the scholars reviewed here, I would argue, (correctly) see the fear of God in Job 37:14-24 as being grounded in the human recognition of the divine greatness and power, on the one hand, and the just divine governance of the world, on the other hand.²⁷ This recognition can then be related to wisdom in various ways.²⁸

In underscoring God's greatness and justice, scholarly views clearly show a correspondence with Otto's views in terms of an experience of the

²⁵ See Balentine, *Job*, 617; Dianne Bergant, *Job, Ecclesiastes* (OTM; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982), 177-178; Clines, *Job 21-37*, 886-887; Habel, *Job*, 516; Hartley, *Job*, 484; Newsom, "Job," 591-593; Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 130; Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, 257.

²⁶ This also goes for Clines. Though Clines in particular makes a great deal of Otto's views, his understanding of *mysterium tremendum* sways heavily towards a consideration of only *tremendum*, based on such things as God's might, judgement, *etc.*. This is perhaps most visible in an earlier contribution by David J. A. 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).

²⁷ See footnote 25.

²⁸ See footnote 25.

daunting character of the divine (*tremendum*). A mighty God of retribution – even if it be a highly qualified retribution – is, after all, a very fearful entity. But while this should make clear that scholars stress very strongly the connection between fear and order in Job 37:14-24, they seem to miss by and large the connection between fear and mystery.²⁹ In Job 37:14-24 God is, after all, to be feared not only because of his might and just judgement, but also because he cannot be “found” (Job 37:23).

The connection between the fear of God and the mystery of God in the speeches of Elihu and in Job 37:14-24 in particular can perhaps be best explained by taking note again that Elihu does not speak simply about the fact of incomprehensibility in the happenings of nature, but also their incomprehensible timing and the purposefulness behind these happenings (see previous section). This is perhaps most evident in the verse directly preceding the pericope investigated in this study, namely that “He (that is to say God – E. E.) brings the clouds to punish men, or to water his earth and to show his love” (Job 37:13, NIV). Thus a single phenomenon in nature can be purposefully used for more than one thing. This is order indeed, but no simple order, which seems to suggest that in Job 37:14-24 Elihu can hardly be encouraging Job to run and hide in terror of the mighty God’s impending judgement or to simply accept the answers of traditional wisdom, but something different. Traditional wisdom has, after all, already failed in Job’s case³⁰ and Job was, after all, already in terror of God because of this.³¹ In Job 37:14-24 Elihu, on the other hand, argues in favour of the notion of fear grounded upon order,³² but Elihu’s understanding

²⁹ It should be stressed that this does not mean that the scholars mentioned above miss the mystery of God or his governance of the cosmos as noteworthy features of the text, but rather that they do not elucidate on the possible *connection* between the mystery of God and the fear of God in the text of Job 37:14-24.

³⁰ Lindsay Wilson, “The Book of Job and the Fear of God,” *TynBul* 46/1 (1995): 77-78.

³¹ See, for instance, Job 9:25-35. I would furthermore postulate that there is possibly a connection between the views expressed by the character of Job and the historical context out of which his speeches arose. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 78 in particular emphasises the possibility that the poetic dialogues of the book of Job might have arisen out of the experience of the Babylonian exile. This would indeed have been a fitting context for a writer to express genuine terror of God because of an utter breakdown of all things orderly and trustworthy.

³² As with the character of Job, it may also be possible to relate the views expressed by Elihu to his probable later historical context. If the speeches of Elihu were added to the book of Job at a later time, it follows that they would have been added some time in the postexilic period. In this regard see, for instance, Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 84 for a dating in the Persian period. See also Newsom, “Job,” 325-326 for references to scholarship dating the speeches of Elihu to the third century. Elihu’s focus on the moral purposefulness of suffering furthermore shows interesting correspondences with the Greek notion of *paideia*, which could possibly serve as further proof that the

of order and the one responsible for it may be ambiguous and utterly incomprehensible from the human perspective. In Job 37:14-24 God is to be genuinely feared because of his might and just judgement. However, the same God, incomprehensible as he or his ways might be, also governs the world with a moral purposefulness which Job does not recognise – and it is exactly this which, from Elihu's perspective in Job 37:14-24, seems to occasion Job's mistaken terror.

This interpretation has the additional implication that Elihu's recognition of the relationship between the fear of God and the mystery of God in Job 37:14-24 begins to move beyond the views of Job and his friends, calling into question their entire way of understanding their world and their deity. This suggests that the understanding of the fear of God in Job 37:14-24 also anticipates the impending YHWH speeches of chs. 38-41, in which the views expressed in the rest of the book are similarly called into question.

It would seem, then, that the kind of interpretation offered by Joo³³ concerning the YHWH speeches might also be fitting, at least in part, for understanding the fear of God in Job 37:14-24, namely that the very real *tremendum* of God should be complemented by an awareness of *mysterium*. It can be concluded, therefore, that Otto's views can indeed help to shed light on the meaning and significance of the fear of God in Job 37:14-24, even to the point of being appropriate for attempting to understand its meaning. In Job 37:14-24 the experience of God comes closer to *tremendum* complemented by *mysterium* than sheer terror (which is in any case not the same as *tremendum*)³⁴ with no awareness of *mysterium*.

C QOHELET 3:1-17

1 Exegetical Remarks on Qohelet 3:1-17

As in the case of Job 37:14-24, some brief exegetical remarks are necessary in order to fully appreciate both the possibilities and limitations of Otto's views for better understanding the meaning and significance of the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17.

speeches came into being in the Persian period (during which time the Jewish literati would quite possibly have been aware of Greek philosophy) or the Hellenistic period. For a good discussion on the notion of *paideia*, albeit within the context of Hebrews 12:1-13, see N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1-13 in Its Rhetorical, Religious and Philosophical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 192-205.

³³ Samantha Joo, "Job, the Biblical Atlas," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74/1 (2012): 67-83.

³⁴ See 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), 27-28.

The majority of critical scholars today recognise the body of the book of Qohelet as representing mainly the words of the heterodox Qohelet, while the concluding section and some other verses in the book possibly represent the words of a more conservative or traditional redactor.³⁵ I agree with Bosman that it is not really entirely clear-cut that a verse like 12:13 is to be considered a secondary and conservative addition.³⁶ There can be no doubt, however, that the seeming inconsistency of the book as a whole presents an enduring challenge to those who wish to understand it.

Turning attention then to the body the book, there is a great amount of uncertainty as to exactly how its structure is to be understood.³⁷ Without going into any detailed justification at this point, this article considers Qoh 3:1-17 to be a more or less unified block of material concerning itself with time, or more specifically the appropriate time.³⁸

The theme of the appropriate time is most clearly evident in the famous poem of Qoh 3:1-8. In this poem Qohelet is evidently not arguing that there should be a time for each of the things he mentions as he is elucidating on something that everyone knows to be true, namely that contrasting events all have a place within the whole of human life.³⁹

The description of these times leads Qohelet to ask, as he did at the very beginning of the book, for the "profit" in human life (v. 9).⁴⁰ He then immediately directs his attention to the "task" that God has given humans by which they should be "occupied" (v. 10):⁴¹ this task, indeed one of the central tasks of the wisdom enterprise, would then, in the light of the times mentioned by

³⁵ For a fairly typical representation in this regard, see W. Sibley Towner, "Ecclesiastes," *NIB* 5: 276.

³⁶ See Hendrik Bosman, "Being Wise Betwixt Order and Mystery: Keeping the Commandments and Fearing the Lord," *Scriptura* 111/1 (2012): 437-438.

³⁷ Robert B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1965), 199 has already remarked that "Qohelet has no ordered sequence to his argument." This view is seemingly confirmed by James L. Crenshaw's review of the virtually complete disagreement amongst scholars concerning the structure of the book. See Crenshaw's commentary, James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1988), 38-47.

³⁸ For a discussion on why this is the proposed demarcation, see my unpublished thesis, Ellis, "'Fear of God,'" 73-75. The proposed demarcation agrees with *Die Bybel: Nuwe Vertaling*, the Afrikaans sister translation of the *Good News Bible*.

³⁹ See, for instance, Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 111.

⁴⁰ Many scholars have recognised the possible economic background to Qohelet's use of the word יְתִירֹן. For a relatively recent contribution along these lines, see Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB; Doubleday, 1997), specifically pp. 21-33.

⁴¹ Qohelet 3:10 most likely has an oppressive connotation. See for instance Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 97.

Qohelet, probably have been that of determining the right time for certain actions and by so doing secure the desired results.⁴² However, having made everything appropriate⁴³ in its time and having given humans the task of finding out these times, God has also placed "eternity" in human hearts (v. 11). This "eternity" is probably not so much an obstacle to knowledge as it is an awareness of knowledge that is ultimately beyond reach.⁴⁴ In other words, despite the "eternity" placed in their hearts humans are not able to "find" the work of God, that is to say the times that he has determined, from beginning to end (v. 11). Thus, even though there is a fitting time for everything and even if humans may know that this is the case, there is no way for them to get a grasp on these times, meaning that the task will keep humans endlessly occupied without their ever being capable of achieving their goal (consequently engaging in toil without profit).

In vv. 12-13 we find one of Qohelet's famous *carpe diem* sayings. In the light of the endless and profitless task described in the previous verses, the good in human life resides in the little pleasures that life allows. Yet even these pleasures are ultimately beyond human control: they are nothing but gifts from the arbitrary and distant divine giver.⁴⁵

Verse 14 seems to take further the train of thought left off in v. 11 concerning what God "does." In v. 14 Qohelet again underscores the permanency and unchangeability of everything that God does. Humans cannot add anything to it or remove anything from it, even if they wanted to. More importantly, however, is that Qohelet also adds an additional bit of information which is motivated by what has already been said: this state of affairs has been instituted

⁴² See for instance Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 216 as well as Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 139.

⁴³ On this translation as opposed to the translation "beautiful" see for instance Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 29.

⁴⁴ There exists a great amount of uncertainty as to how the word עֹלָם in this verse should be understood. A scholar such as Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 91 seems to understand it to be essentially an obstacle to knowledge. By contrast Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press; Libronix Digital Library System, 2004), n.p.; and Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 119 hold that it is not so much an obstacle to knowledge as an awareness of knowledge that is ultimately beyond reach.

⁴⁵ Many scholarly contributions offer descriptions of Qohelet's view of God in agreement with this statement. Perhaps one of the most succinct generalised descriptions is the one offered by Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 136-138.

by God himself with the express purpose that humans should "fear before him."⁴⁶

Before considering in more detail the importance of the fear of God in this passage, it is interesting to note that in v. 15 Qohelet takes the train of thought even further by painting a picture of God as "pursuing the past in order to bring it back to the present," in other words making the same things happen over and over again.⁴⁷ Verses 16 then repeats the kind of ideas on the appropriate time expressed in the poem, namely that there is a place for everything within the divinely appointed system of times – even for wickedness where one would expect just judgement. Against this background v. 17 is probably not so much affirming God's just judgement as it is asserting that God "judges" the wicked and the righteous regardless of their being righteous or wicked. All men (and women) are after all לְמֹתָם and destined to die.⁴⁸

To tie these brief exegetical remarks together into some generalised statement on the significance of the fear of God in this passage, it might be useful to consider again the idea of the appropriate time and, more importantly, how this idea is related to God in Qoh 3:1-17. The idea is often stated that a primary task of the wisdom enterprise was to be able to determine the right time for certain actions and by so doing to secure the desired results. In this regard Von Rad points out that while the more traditional sages hardly thought that humans were in complete control, one can recognise a shift in Qohelet's thinking to the effect that human freedom or ability became essentially lost and the determining of the times was left entirely in the hands of the divine.⁴⁹ In Qoh 3:1-17 this determinism does not, however, imply order in the traditional sense, or the ability of humans to be able to attain knowledge of the divinely appointed times. The principles of causality and justice fail in Qohelet: there is a time for everything, both good and bad, just and unjust, causally appropriate and completely arbitrary and out of place. What is more, this state of affairs is related explicitly to God's rule over the cosmos.⁵⁰ *He* is the one responsible for the ambiguities of life under the sun "so that they (humans) will fear before

⁴⁶ For the idea that the ׀ clause conveys purpose see, for instance, Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 212-213.

⁴⁷ For this quote, see Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 100. Crenshaw's view is confirmed, generally speaking, by Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 124 as well as Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 30.

⁴⁸ Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 197.

⁴⁹ Von Rad, *Wisdom*, 142-143.

⁵⁰ One can indeed speculate to what extent Qohelet's views on God might have been occasioned by his historical context of the Persian or more probably Hellenistic empires. On the issue of the dating of Qohelet, see Leo Perdue G., *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 198. In the words of Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 137, as far as Qohelet is concerned, "God runs the world like a distant monarch ruling a minor province."

him" (v. 14). This ultimately means that in Qoh 3:1-17 the fear of the Lord is no longer the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7), but exactly the reverse. In Qoh 3:1-17 it is precisely the lack of human knowledge and control that occasion the fear of God.⁵¹

2 The Fear of God in Qohelet 3:1-17 in the Light of Otto's *Das Heilige*

As in the case with Job 37:14-24, an appropriate place to start when seeking to determine the usefulness of Otto's views for understanding the meaning and significance of the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17 would be to consider the views of other scholars.

A selective review of recent critical exegetical commentaries and other more focused works⁵² again reveals that the majority of scholars are seemingly uninterested in Otto's views on the *mysterium tremendum* for better understanding the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17. Of the scholars reviewed, only one, namely Roland Murphy, makes direct reference to Otto's views on the *mysterium tremendum* with regards to the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17. Another, Thomas Krüger, also mentions the *tremendum* and the *fascinosum*. Both Murphy and Krüger furthermore seem to be fairly nuanced in their understanding of Otto's views. However, as with Job 37:14-24 the lack of direct reference to Otto's views in the contributions by most other scholars again seems to suggest that his views were not found to be particularly useful for elucidating the meaning and importance of the fear of God in this passage (with the exceptions of Murphy and Krüger).

While scholars disagree on how exactly the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17 is to be understood,⁵³ they are in agreement as to the origin of "fear" in this pas-

⁵¹ This view has been expressed more generally by Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *JBL* 105/3 (1986): 427. Writing on the meaning of *הִבַּל* for Qohelet, Fox posits that for Qohelet, God intends for human belief in the system of order in the cosmos to fail, because that would cause them to "fear" and "fear" is precisely what God wants to arouse.

⁵² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 99-100; Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 136-138, 212-213; Tomas Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qohelet* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 110-111, 199; Milton P. Horne, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* (SHBC; Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2003), 429; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, n.p.; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 123-124; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxy, 35; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 57-59, 165, 174; Towner, "Ecclesiastes," 306-307; Perdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 197.

⁵³ Scholarly views concerning the meaning of the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17 fall more or less into two broad groups. One group, in accordance with what might be termed their negative understanding of Qohelet's message, understand the word to convey genuine fear/terror before the divine tyrant. This group is represented by Crenshaw and Longman. The second group, in accordance with what might be termed a more positive understanding of Qohelet's message, understand the word along the lines of conveying "awe" or "reverence." This second group can be further divided

sage. "Fear" is grounded not so much in a special, numinous experience of God's being or presence, but rather in the ultimate incomprehensibility of the existing world order and the divine sovereign responsible for it. This pericope's strong focus on the fear of God having its basis in the incomprehensibility of the world order and the divine sovereign behind it, then, clearly corresponds to Otto's idea of the *mysterium*. If one considers humans' obsession with trying to understand this mystery, it might even be possible to connect the meaning of the term in this pericope to the idea of *fascinosum*.⁵⁴ But what about the *tremendum*?

The problem in discussing the *tremendum* aspect of the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17 is that scholars are divided on the issue. Some consider Qohelet to be talking about genuine fear and even terror, while others argue for awe or reverence, not excluding the possibility of genuine fear, and still others emphasise awe or reverence coupled with an idea of distance and separation.⁵⁵ Understanding the fear of God in this pericope as distance and separation clearly shows very little correspondence with Otto's views. He was after all concerned with a very immediate experience of the divine. Understanding it to convey sheer terror also hardly corresponds to Otto's idea of a special, numinous awe. Both of these explanations, furthermore, have certain shortcomings. It seems very difficult to explain why Qohelet would be encouraging his audience to live in constant and utter terror of a deity so distant that he can even be said to be beyond the realm of human experience.⁵⁶ On the other hand, it seems very unlikely that Qohelet would use the word ירא to mean something in which there is no real experience or at least awareness of God's daunting character.

It thus seems as though a recognition of the multifaceted nature of the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17 (*mysterium tremendum*, cf. Murphy) is preferable to less nuanced points of view. Similarly to Job 37:14-24, the fear of God in Qoh 3:1-17 does not seem to relate only to *mysterium* or only to *tremendum*, but rather to a creative tension between both.

into those not excluding an element of genuine fearfulness as part of this awe or reverence (Fox, Frydich, Krüger, Murphy, Perdue and Sibley Towner), and those who rather emphasise a kind of distance or separation which does not necessarily amount to a genuine fearfulness (Horne and Seow).

⁵⁴ As is indeed done by Krüger, *Qoheleth*, n.p.

⁵⁵ See footnote 53.

⁵⁶ According to James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 92, Qohelet deems the deity to be distant and thus withdrawn from human experience. This causes the deity to be less threatening (though in general also less meaningful to human life).

D CONCLUSION

Investigating the two texts of Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17, it was found that, notwithstanding possible indirect influence by Otto, Otto's ideas did not have much of a direct impact on how recent scholars understood the notion of the fear of God in these two texts. The vast majority of scholars reviewed make no reference to Otto's views, and even if they do, it is not necessarily in a way which is entirely compatible with the finer nuances of the views of Otto himself (the exceptions being Roland Murphy and Thomas Krüger, who both seem to be fairly sensitive to the finer nuances of Otto's views). This tendency clearly points toward the difficulties in attempting to make sense of the notion of the fear of God in the HB in the light of Otto's work. In a very real sense much of what the HB has to say about the fear of God does not square with Otto's ideas on the holy,⁵⁷ compelling the biblical scholar to find alternative ways of conceptualising the fear of God as evinced in the various texts of the HB.

Despite scholars' general lack of interest in Otto's views, this article has, however, shown that serious consideration of them may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the notion of the fear of God in the texts of Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17 than would otherwise be the case. In particular, this article has shown that taking Otto's views on the *mysterium tremendum* into account can facilitate a greater appreciation of how the fear of God in Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17 is not only connected with *tremendum*, but also inexorably tied up with *mysterium*. In this sense the article also goes further than the previous one by highlighting the hermeneutical significance of Otto's views for contemporary scholarship. Otto's views do not provide a final answer to the fear of God in the HB, but it can potentially stimulate the reader to recognise and conceptualise elements of the fear of God that he/she would otherwise have remained ignorant of or unable to conceptualise. In the case of Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17 Otto's views helps the reader to appreciate that the meaning and significance of the fear of God is not simply a matter of "fear" or of "mystery," but rather a matter of "fear" AND "mystery" (*tremendum* AND *mysterium*). Maintaining this (creative) tension in the human experience of the divine, put into words most eloquently by Otto, clearly can be of importance for the interpretation of Job 37:14-24 and Qoh 3:1-17 – as it may very well also be for other texts of the HB.

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⁵⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 1; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 203.

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