

REV. DARIUSZ IWANSKI

„FEARING YAHWEH”M IN PROVERBS

The *fear of Yahweh/God* is one of the most crucial and at the same time most complex issues in the Hebrew Bible. It is also one of the predominant topics in biblical wisdom literature. The subsequent study focuses on the *fear of Yahweh* as presented in the book of Proverbs. It is not only quite frequent there but also located in strategic places within its composition. There is no doubt then that the topic is crucial for comprehension of the book¹. In this context it seems quite astonishing that so far no monograph on the *fear of Yahweh* in Proverbs has been provided. My contribution is only a short presentation of main problems related to the topic.

1. GENERAL DISTINCTION

Before addressing the topic we have to distinguish two basic meanings of the root סָרַח namely: the *literal* (everyday life fear) and the *figurative* one (rendering theological concepts). The *fear of Yahweh/God* is figurative. Its figurative use is the focal point of the following study².

¹ Cf. e.g. D. Cox, *Proverbs with an Introduction to Sapiential Books* (OTM 17; Wilmington 1982) 67-71; R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study* (Leiden 1995) 136; L. Wilson, „The Book of Job and the Fear of the God”, 61; R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (Nashville 1998) 254.

² As far as the development of wisdom ideas and concepts in five wisdom books is concerned J. Vilchez Lіндеz, „Panorama des recherches actuelles sur la sagesse dans l’Ancien Testament” in *La sagesse biblique de l’Ancien au Nouveau Testament* (ed. J. Trublet) (LD 160; Paris 1995) 133-137, discerns three stages: 1) the most ancient - wisdom discovers the direct meaning of nature and history (Proverbs); 2) the second stage - traditional wisdom undergoes a crisis (Job, Qohelet); 3) The third stage - brings a solution to the crisis of wisdom (Sir, Wis).

The root ירא and its derivatives are frequent in the Hebrew Bible (four hundred thirty-five occurrences). They „cover almost the entire semantic range of «fear»”³. We find here: verbal forms (the most numerous group – three hundred thirty-three occurrences)⁴, verbal adjectives (ירא; forty-five cases), nominalized infinitives (יראיה forty-five cases; מורא twelve cases). It is also interesting to note an accumulation of the derivatives of the root ary in some specific books of the Hebrew Bible: the Psalms (eighty-three times), wisdom literature (forty-eight times) and Deuteronomy (forty-four times).

In general it seems justified to distinguish two main aspects of the *fear of Yahweh/God* (in its figurative meaning): 1) loyalty to the God of the Covenant (worshiping Him and keeping His commandments); 2) moral attitude, conduct. In the context of the single books, the expression takes on slightly different shades of meaning.

2. FEAR OF YAHWEH IN PROVERBS⁵

Analyzing the meaning of the *fear of Yahweh* in Proverbs, we should start with the statement in Prov 1:7a: יראת יהוה ראשית דעת *The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge*. This hemistich has been considered by many scholars a ‘motto’ and a clue for the reading of the entire book⁶. Verse 7 stands at the end of the introductory section (1:1-7)⁷. V. 1, being a sort of headline, announces the content

³ H. F. Fuhs, “arey” in *TDOT* VI, 290-315 [295].

⁴ They occur mainly in the Qal but the Niphal participle ar’An *terrible*, is also of considerable frequency (thirty times).

⁵ Fourteen occurrences: 1:7,29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26,27; 15:16,33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17. Two other expressions are: ירא אֶת־יְהוָה *fear Yahweh!* (3:7; 24:21) and ירא יהוה *the one fearing Yahweh* (14:2).

⁶ Cf. e.g. O. Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984) 13; R.N. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville 1998) 257.

⁷ B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos* (HAT 16; Tübingen 21963) 19-20, takes v.7 for a beginning of a new section (vv.7-9) on the basis of rhythmical correspondence. Similarly O. Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)*, 13-14, who connects v.7 with the following vv. 8-9 on the basis of thematic correspondence “Jahwe und die Elterns” (similarly K. A. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East. The Factual History of a Literary Form”, *TynB* 28 [1977] 69-114 [70]). These views, however, are questionable and the connection with the preceding section is more plausible: 1) in v. 8 there is a shift in person – direct addressing “the son”, which would signal a new beginning; besides this verse is also known as an introductory

of the entire book, i.e., the proverbs of Solomon⁸. The following sentences (with exception of vv. 5 and 7) show syntactical dependence on v. 1. They all start with an ‘infinitive + ל’ construction, and explain the purpose of the proverbs of Solomon. V. 5, dealing with the wise ones, disturbs the sequence of these verses. It does not start with the similar construction (instead, it employs jussive clauses) and stands in contrast with v. 4 where the main characters are פְּתָאִים *the simple (inexperienced)* and נְעָר *the young* as those to whom the proverbs are addressed. V. 5, then, seems to be a redactional clause inserted here to make clear that the wise also can profit from reading/learning the book⁹.

Omitting verse 5 we arrive at “a symmetrical paragraph of two quatrains: 1:2,3 ‘that men may acquire wisdom’ and 1:4,6 ‘that the immature may be educated into understanding the discourses of the sages’”¹⁰. In 1:2-4 there is a considerable accumulation of words for wisdom: בִּינָה – *understanding*, חֵכְמָה וּמוֹסָר – *wisdom and discipline* (v.2); לָקַחַת מוֹסָר הַשֵּׁבֶל – *to gain the discipline of insight* (v.3); דַּעַת וּמוֹזָקָה – *knowledge and shrewdness*, עָרְוָה – *cunning* (v.4)¹¹.

These are parallel expressions - practically equivalent in meaning¹². They send a message to the reader that the main focus of the book is going to be on wisdom, even though the verse may seem

formula from other fragments (e.g. Prov 6:20-21) 2) in v.7 there are words and expressions taken up from the preceding verses (חֵכְמָה וּמוֹסָר from v.2 and t[;D’ from v.4) and hence logically this verse tends to be read together with what precedes it.

⁸ Cf. C. H. Toy, *Proverbs* (ICC; Edinburgh 1914) 4; A. Meinhold, *Die Sprüche*. Teil 1: Sprüche Kapitel 1-15 (ZBKAT 16; Zürich 1991) 47.

⁹ Cf. R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids 1994) 31.

¹⁰ C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, 5. In fact there is more data indicating that the entire section 1:1-6 was not homogeneous. For the description of a probable redactional work see S. Pié i Ninot, “L’estructura literària de Proverbis 1,1-7 i la finalitat del llibre dels Proverbis”, *RCatalT* 6 (1981) 3-12; F. Renfroe, “The Effect of Redaction on the Structure of Prov 1:1-6”, *ZAW* 101 (1989) 290-293.

¹¹ For more details on the meaning of the above and other terms of wisdom see: M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18A; New York 2000) 28-38; E. G. Woodcock, “Basic Terminology of Wisdom, Folly, Righteousness and Wickedness” in *Learning from the Sages. Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs* (ed. R. B. Zuck) (Grand Rapids 1995) 111-124 [111-116].

¹² Cf. C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, 5; G. von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1970) 75. R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, 31, emphasizes the fact that these terms “are not synonyms, though the precise distinctions between some of them are not clear”.

to be dominated rather by the theological concept of the *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* *fear of Yahweh*. The second part of the couplet leaves no doubt about that¹³. Nevertheless, it is correct to take v. 7 as a motto for the entire book. In a similar form it appears elsewhere in the book and outside of it (Prov 9:10; 15:33; Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Sir 1:14) and should be taken for “variants of the same saying”¹⁴. Although in v. 7a the word *דַּעַת* *knowledge* is used, the word *wisdom* can be meant here as well¹⁵.

A more complicated task is to establish the correct translation of the word *רֵאשִׁית*, which governs the connection between the fear of Yahweh and knowledge/wisdom. There have been various renderings proposed (from ‘perfection’, ‘beginning’, through ‘best part’, ‘principle’ to ‘sum’, ‘essence’ etc.)¹⁶. The majority of scholars favor the translation “beginning” – mainly on the basis of a correspondence with the parallel text in Prov 9:10 with which Prov 1:7 creates a sort of inclusion for the entire section Prov 1-9, providing also a clue for its reading¹⁷. As far as the inclusion is concerned, we may see that it is actually the fear of Yahweh that seems to embrace the whole book, since it also appears at the end of Proverbs (31:30b)¹⁸.

¹³ Cf. e.g. B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomos*, 20.

¹⁴ H. Blocher, “The Fear of the Lord as the Principle of Wisdom”, *TynB* 28 (1977) 3-28 [6].

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 5; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 68-69.

¹⁶ H. Blocher, “The Fear of the Lord as the Principle of Wisdom”, 12-15, provides a thorough survey of these proposals.

¹⁷ Cf. W. McKane, *Proverbs*, 264; O. Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)*, 11.13; R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 5; M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 67-68.

¹⁸ This colon (Prov 31:30b) is quite difficult to render since the word *יִרְאַת* (in the expression *יִרְאַת יְהוָה*) can be taken for a feminine adjective and then referred to a woman fearing Yahweh or as the construct form of the noun *יִרְאַת* *fear*. As such the term could be regarded for an apposition to the preceding word, i.e., *אִשָּׁה* *woman*. Consequently the woman would be here a kind of personification of the fear of Yahweh. Finally, the *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* can be viewed as the object of the verb and hence the fear of Yahweh represented by the woman would be the object of praise (cf. R. E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, 244). M. Gilbert, “Comment lire les écrits sapientiaux de l’Ancien Testament” in *Morale et Ancien Testament* (ed. M. Gilbert – J. L’Hour – J. Scharbert) (LSV 1; Louvain-la-Neuve 1978) 131-175 [144], observes that the entire section Prov 31:10-31 “tente peut-être de réhabiliter la femme (cf. Gn 2-3) que les sages jugeaient parfois sévèrement, à moins qu’il ne serve d’écho au portrait de Dame Sagesse de Pr 1-9 et ne soit ainsi une sorte de conclusion, par inclusion, de tout le livre”.

Nevertheless we may draw first the conclusion that *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* initially appears in Proverbs in a strict connection with wisdom. The latter is available only for those who are equipped with the basic disposition, which is *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* *fear of Yahweh*.

The latter factor is found quite frequently in Proverbs. Besides, its presence in the crucial parts of the structure of Proverbs gives the impression that this concept is an important principle within the book. The fear of the deity was not absent in the wisdom literature of the Near East¹⁹, however, it has nowhere been given such importance as in biblical wisdom (Proverbs in particular). Of course, by definition, wisdom is the focal point in this literature, but the *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* *fear of Yahweh* stands for the indispensable condition to reach that wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). One has to fear Yahweh in terms of recognizing and acknowledging Him as the very beginning of everything, which ultimately finds its expression in putting one's trust in Yahweh and avoiding evil (Prov 3:5-7; 8:13)²⁰. *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* sets up the context in which wisdom is to be found. This context is definitely theological. At the outset it might seem that only in the first nine chapters of Proverbs wisdom has a strictly theological meaning, whereas in the rest of the book it would have more ethical or prudential value. However, such a division was foreign to the Hebrew mind²¹.

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. L. Derousseaux, *La crainte de Dieu dans l'Ancien Testament*. Royauté, alliance, sagesse dans les royaumes d'Israël et de Juda. Recherche d'exégèse et d'histoire sur la racine yârê (LD 63; Paris 1970) 21-66; M. L. Barré, "Fear of God' and the World View of Wisdom", *BTB* 11 (1981) 41-43.

²⁰ J. Vilchez Lіндеz, "Panorama des recherches actuelles sur la sagesse dans l'Ancien Testament" in *La sagesse biblique de l'Ancien au Nouveau Testament* (ed. J. Trublet) (LD 160; Paris 1995) 133-137 [133] notes: "[...] le sage recherche instinctivement le sens profond – originaire et dernier – de la réalité et, plus particulièrement, celui de l'homme, sommet de toutes les choses. Le sage découvre alors que Dieu est présent à l'origine et au terme de tout, car il est le créateur et seigneur de tout".

²¹ A. Barucq, *Le livre des Proverbes* (SB; Paris 1964) 167, observes: "Les sages n'ont pas proposé deux voies de perfection de vie, l'une qui serait laïque, la soumission à la sagesse, considérée comme une sorte de stoïcisme, l'autre qui serait à base de soumission religieuse à Yahweh. La crainte de Yahweh et l'enseignement du sage sont ramenés à une, même réalité en 15:33a et leurs effets sont présentés comme identiques (13:14; 14:27). Une vision de cette morale sapientiale qui tient compte du souci souvent exprimé de lier moralité et religion (cf. encore 14:2; 15:9; 16:6b) semble préférable à celle qui tend à y dissocier les valeurs humaines, laïques, et les valeurs religieuses".

Finally there is at least one concrete hint provided concerning the nature of the fear of Yahweh in Proverbs. In Prov 8:13 we read:

יִרְאַת יְהוָה שְׂנֵאת רָע גְּאֹהֲלָאוֹן וְדַרְכַּי רָע וּפִי תַהֲפֹכֹת שְׂנֵאתִי

The fear of Yahweh is to hate evil;

Pride and arrogance, the evil way

And a perverted mouth I hate

Lady Wisdom, who speaks here, defines the nature of the fear of Yahweh as hating evil. Pride and arrogance, the evil way and a perverted mouth, are more specific examples of evil, which are detested by Lady Wisdom. They are in total opposition to the fear of Yahweh. Thus we can conclude that the one who fears Yahweh would be far from involvement in any form of evil.

Further on we can observe that those who fear Yahweh are somehow associated with life, prosperity. The book of Proverbs quite often exposes the everyday benefits of the fear of Yahweh. We cannot, however, share the opinion of Becker who says in this context that the concept of the fear of Yahweh is almost always (in seven out of nine cases) connected with the doctrine of retribution²². In none of the examples provided by Becker is Yahweh depicted as exercising punishment or reward on humans (nor even being active in a way, which is somewhat required when we talk about retribution).

Consequently the fear of Yahweh is said to be *חַיִּים תּוֹסִיף יָמִים* *prolong life* (Prov 10:27) or to be a *מְקוֹר חַיִּים* *fountain of life* (Prov 14:27; 19:23). That would mean that those who fear Yahweh have an access to wisdom (Prov 15:33), i.e., they know the right way of dealing with things in this world and how to avoid the way that brings destruction (Prov 16:6). As such they have all the right in the world to expect success and prosperity in their lives. Life is to be taken here in terms of its quantitative and qualitative meaning²³. However, the-

²² Cf. J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (AnBib 25; Roma 1965) 224-228.

²³ Fountain of life in Prov is used in reference to a wise, upright speech (Prov 10:11), the law of the wise (Prov 13:14), the fear of God (Prov 14:27), wisdom or understanding (Prov 16:22). In all these cases there is this notion of living a prosperous and happy earthly life as the result of obedience to the highest wisdom, which is ultimately obedience to the law of God (cf. C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, 205). C. H. Toy, *Proverbs*, 298, noted: "In Prov 14:27 the couplet is identical with Prov 13:14, with substitution of *the fear of Yahweh* for *the law of the wise*, the two things being

re are not strict and definite rules here, because one can fear Yahweh and be poor as well (Prov 15:16). Yet it is worthwhile to keep one's fear of Yahweh, because certainly the opposite would be foolishness (Prov 1:7) and the sure way to self-destruction (e.g. Prov 1:28-32; 3:5-7). This makes sense only if man humbly acknowledges Yahweh as the one responsible for the world's design and the only one fully competent to make people know the very wise way of acting in the world.

regarded in Prov as mutually equivalent and as of equal authority [...]. The teaching of the sage rests on his own observation and conviction, but involves the recognition of God as the supreme source of truth”.

24 Similar approach seems to prevail among scholars. G. Fohrer, “σοφία” in *TDNT* VII, 487, says that it “always denotes piety. [...] It is the practical religion of what is done or not done day by day, i.e., ethical conduct”. For H. Blocher, “The Fear of the Lord as the Principle of Wisdom”, 17, it is “devotion”. R. N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs*, 91. 94, prefers to look at it as on “the Religion of Israel” and “knowledge of what is due to God”. W. McKane, *Proverbs*, 368, defines it as “the new *mūsār*”, whose “promulgation is associated with a shift of emphasis from education to piety”. D. Cox, *Proverbs*, 67-71, says of the fear of the Lord that it is “a form of conscience that calls for an intellectual adhesion to a principle, the divine order [...]”. L. Alonso Schökel – J. Vilchez Lіндеz, *Proverbios*, 158, hold that fear in the expression “fear of God” means “reverencia o respeto” (similarly A. Leličvre – A. Maillot, *Comentaire des Proverbes*, III. Chapitres 1-9 (Paris 2000) 24). Finally, M. V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 69-70, comes up with a very interesting claim saying that “the fear of God in Proverbs is a religious virtue, but it cannot be ‘softened’ into a confident sense of reverence and piety”. The fear of God is to be considered as ‘conscience’.