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Fear not!

Scriptus Papers



Biblical perspectives on various topics

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Introduction

*"It's important that we experience **fear** because it keeps us **safe**"*

*"**Fear** is our **survival** response" (Dr. Sikora)*

"Mmm", that's odd because in the Hebrew Bible (HB), God instructed His people many times to "fear not". Similarly, Jesus said to humans often, "Fear not". In fact, "fear not", and similar expressions such as 'do not fear', 'do not be afraid', is the most often repeated command in the Bible, occurring some 40-50 times. However, there was one exception to "fear not", and it is 'fear Him'. That is, fear God for survival.

Apparently, fear is a universal human experience, and did our Creator mean it to be so? So, why is it, and is it worth investigating? I think so, and this *Scriptus Paper* centres on the topic of human fear. Specifically, we'll look at the biology, the psychology, and theology of fear.

Biology of fear

According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 300 million of the global population (4%) currently experience an anxiety disorder, making anxiety disorders the most common of all mental disorders (GBD).

Even in the highly-developed United States, nearly 1 in 3 individuals will experience an anxiety disorder in their lifetime, which is eight times the rate in the global population, and existing treatments are inconsistently effective ([Grogans](#)), which is unsurprising since there is no consensus on what "fear" means, and what can't be defined , can't be measured.

The standard position is that fear is a non-subjective brain state controlling hard-wired and learned behavioural responses to threats in addition to subjective experiences ([Raber](#)). Moreover, there is no single brain structure for processing fear, so there appears to be multiple fear pathways that may not be well understood ([Adolphs](#), [Beckers](#), [Gross & Canteras](#)). Further, [Matthen](#) argues that fear is one of the biological universals, and may be defined as a feeling that enables one to respond appropriately to a dangerous situation.

The biochemical reaction to fear causes our bodies to produce automatic physical reactions such as sweating, increased heart rate, breathlessness, and dilated pupils. These prepare the body to either combat the environmental threat or run away from it – the 'fight or flight' response. Specifically, in response to a threat, the sympathetic nervous system stimulates the adrenal glands to trigger the release of hormones - adrenaline provides energy to the major muscles, and noradrenaline increases alertness, arousal, and attention, resulting in physical reactions ([Guy-Evans](#)).

Psychology of fear

While the biochemical reaction to fear is universal, the emotional response to fear, however, is individual. While knowledge of the biological bases of fear is substantial, much more needs to be done to understand psychological fear ([Steimer](#)).

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown ([Carleton](#)). Relatedly, [Armfield](#) suggests that perceptions of a stimulus as uncontrollable, unpredictable, dangerous and disgusting are essential aspects in the cause of fear. That is, it is how a stimulus is perceived that determines fear rather than the stimulus per se.

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Theology of fear

If man's understanding of fear has a lot of unknowns, even after centuries of man's existence, is the Bible's theology of fear any clearer?

First reference: Yirah

*He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was **afraid** (yirah), because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Genesis 3:10).*

This is the first reference to fear in the Hebrew Bible (HB), and appears after Adam sinned by disobeying God, and so he hid from Him. Adam doesn't want to see God, nor does He want God to see Him. This is the flight response often referred to as one of the actions afraid people may take. Fear is a new entrant to the biblical narrative, for there is no mention of there being any fear in Adam's dealings with God before this. Can we say, then, that fear is the product of sin? I think that we must. But what is biblical fear?

There is no single word for "fear" in Hebrew, and the various terms can have multiple meanings, so context is definitive. However, the most frequent word used is 'yirah', which sometimes expresses being afraid, while in other contexts, "yirah" denotes awe, or adoration.

For example, *yirah* in the Genesis 3:10 text above shows Adam in hiding in fright. This is the psychological fear of punishment, the anticipation of something harmful. However, in Genesis 22:12, *yirah* denotes reverence, and respect. God said to Abraham: "*Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you **fear** (yirah) God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.*"

Another example I think is provided from the life of David when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

*Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me; all day long foes oppress me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many fight against me. O Most High, **when I am afraid (yirah)**, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; **I am not afraid (yirah)**; what can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56:1-4).*

The first *yirah* is that psychological fear that comes from the oppression that David experienced from his enemies. In contrast, the second *yirah* in the sense of awe comes from God's word in which David trusts and it eliminates his psychological fear. That is, the basis for David's confidence is God's word of assuring promise of protection ([Skip Moen, 2017](#)).

Yirah is connected with a Hebrew word that means "flowing", a "flowing of the gut," and is related to words meaning rain or stream as a flowing of water, which can be applied to "fear" or "reverence" ([Benner](#)). As such, *yirah* is the source of wisdom and knowledge, even life. We've all been scared or been in the presence of something so amazing that you could feel it in your gut?

See how this idea is expressed in the next text:

The fear (yirah) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight (Proverbs 9:10).

The common interpretation of this verse is that to get wisdom one has to be in great awe of Yahweh, that is, it is a human initiative. However, when a noun (fear) precedes another noun (Lord) in Hebrew, it is connected to the second noun to form one concept. So here, the fear (*yirah*) belongs to the Lord, and the initiative is His.



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Yirah continued

However, note the seven “*I wills*” of God’s initiative in Jeremiah’s text.

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear (yirah) me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear (yirah) of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul (Jeremiah 32:38-41).

That is, *yirah* as awe proceeds from the Lord to His people as in "flowing of the gut" above, and the resultant wisdom depends entirely on the Lord’s gift. It is not humanly generated. Also, *yirah* does not occur in relations between equals, only in hierarchical relationships. So, to “fear” Yahweh involves acknowledging one’s lower standing before Him and often taking concrete action based upon that acknowledgment ([Lasater](#)).

Yirah summary

Yirah has two core meanings—fear and awe. Bernard Steinberg, executive director of Harvard Hillel from 1993 to 201, taught that *awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me*. That is, when I am afraid of God, I’m concerned about how His might could hurt me, but when I hold God in awe, I exalt and elevate Him.

So, *yirah* as awe, has to do with beholding something that is beyond one’s capabilities and understanding. That is, when the soul holds something or someone in awe, it may imagine something very great, exalted, elevated, and high, compared with its own lowliness, though it does not imagine that any harm will come to it from that great thing and therefore does not fear it. So, *yirah* in the sense of awe is loftier than *yirah* in the sense of fear ([Held](#)).

Fear not

I want to turn now to those “fear not” statements from both God in the HB, and from the Lord Jesus in the New Testament (NT), and set against on the other hand, the imperatives to “fear God”, or “fear Him”.

Fear not Hebrew Bible

Yirah as ‘afraid’

The Lord is on my side; I am not afraid (Yirah). What can people do to me? (Psalm 118:6).

Fear not enemies

Multiple times the Lord told individuals, or the Israel nation, not to fear (*yirah*) their enemies (see Genesis 15:1, 26:24, 46:3, Deuteronomy 3:2, Joshua 8:1, 10:8, Judges 6:10, 2 Chronicles 20, Psalm 118:6, Isaiah 7:4, 8:12, 35:4, 40:9, 41:10, Zechariah 8:13).

In each of these cases the Lord gives a reason to fear not, such as “I am” your protector, “I am” with you, “I am your God”, “I will” bless you, “I will” make you great, “I will” help you, “I will” strengthen you, “I will” uphold you, “I will” save you, “I have” given your enemies to you, “I have” chosen you, and “Here is your God!”

So, if fear is on one side of the scales it is outbalanced by the Almighty. Elimination of fear is not self-generated, but God-generated, for His promises as the “I am”, and “I will”, and “I have” are fear eradicators.



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Fear not exile

Fear not (Yirah), O Israel, for I will save you from captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid (Charad)). Fear not (Yirah), for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished (Jeremiah 46:27-28).

Israel went into exile in foreign lands as God's judgment on its national rebellion. Nevertheless, the promise of discipline was mixed with a promise of deliverance (Isaiah 43:5, 54:4-7, 46:27, Zephaniah 3:15-16). The promise of exile made the nation fearful, but the Lord's 'fear not' was designed to ameliorate their distress as they faced the unknown. God's holiness demanded the prophesied departure, but His love demanded the comforting 'fear not'.

Yirah as 'adoration'

In the texts on the next page, fear is *Yirah* in the sense of revere, adore or admire. This is made clear in the 2 Kings text where 'fear' is followed by bowing to the gods and sacrificing to them rather than fearing the Lord and bowing and sacrificing to Him.

The Lord made a covenant with them and commanded them, "You shall not fear (Yirah, revere) other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them, but you shall fear (Yirah, revere) the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm. You shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you shall sacrifice. And the statutes and the rules and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do. You shall not fear (Yirah, revere) other gods, and you shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear (Yirah, revere) other gods, but you shall fear (Yirah, revere) the Lord your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies." However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner (2 Kings 17:35-40).

Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear (Yirah, revere) you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage (Isaiah 63:17).

'Fear not' NT

In the 'fear nots' that Jesus spoke, 'fear' is (*phobeo*) meaning to endow with fear, or more specifically, to put to flight by scaring away ([Abarim Publications](#), [NT Greek Lexicon](#)). We'll come to those references shortly, but the flight meaning that lexicons give is too restrictive, and does not apply in all of the NT texts. Like 'yirah' in the Hebrew Bible, *phobeo* can also mean awe, revere, adore, or admire. A couple of examples will prove this.

Firstly, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea of Galilee, they were terrified (*phobeo*), saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear (*phobeo*). But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (*phobeo*) (Matthew 14:25-27). Quite clearly, this is the flight response.



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'Fear not' NT continued

Secondly, consider the last reference to *phobeo* in the NT:

*And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and **worshipped** God who is seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" And from the throne came a voice saying, "**Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear (*phobeo*) him, small and great**" (Revelation 19:4).*

Worship (prostrating oneself in homage, reverencing, or adoring), along with praise (to tell about, extoll or recommend) are to occupy all who fear (*phobeo*) Him. *Phobeo* is defined in the context here as those who worship God and extoll Him. Clearly, *phobeo* here is expressing awe, not anxiety.

Let's now look at the 'fear nots' that the Lord spoke (Matthew 10:26, 28, 31, Mark 5:36, Luke 5:10, 12:32, John 12:15, Revelation 1:17, 2:10).

Matthew 10:26-31 contains a trio of 'fear nots', which is the centre of the Lord's message to the 12 on the day that He appointed them to the apostleship, and sent them out with His message, and miracles of the kingdom. The Israel response to them would be the same as it was to Christ - as they hated Him, so they will hate them, and the persecution will be so fierce, the Lord advised to flee to other places. It is at that point, the Lord introduced His three fear nots.

Fear not 1

*26 **Fear not (*phobeo*) them therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, that speak in the light: and what you hear whispered, that proclaim upon the housetops.***

The murderous Jewish leadership will be anything but open and transparent to the apostles. But as 'All things are open to the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do' (Hebrews 4:13), He will rip the veil off their secrecy, and lay it bare. On the other hand, the open preaching of the apostles of God's truth will be clearly displayed, so the Lord encourages them to not fear their persecutors.

Fear not 2

Nevertheless, the apostles might lose their lives for following Christ, but He encouraged them not to fear their murderers.

*28 **Fear not (*phobeo*) those which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather **fear (*phobeo*) him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*****

If the first *phobeo* is directed at the apostles in circumstances where the Jews might try to silence the voices of the apostles, and conveys being anxious. The Lord, however, encouraged them not to fear martyrdom by men. However, the second *phobeo* of '**fear Him**' should be understood in the sense of awe, and adore given His ability to destroy both bodies and souls.

Secondly, the word 'kill' is (*apokteino*), which describes the formal and procedural act of removing someone by decision. As such it also used as a legal term referring to the declaration of the death penalty: to condemn to death, rather than to actually kill ([Abarim Publications](#)). So, the Jews could condemn the apostles to death, but could not condemn their souls. 'Souls' (*psuche*) is simply something that breathes. In Genesis 2:7, *the Lord breathed into Adam and he became a living soul*; he didn't get one.

Thirdly, 'destroy' (*apollumi*) means to exterminate, eradicate totally, to wipe out and away ([Abarim Publications](#)). It seems that Jesus is conveying annihilation, not torment.

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Fear not 2 continued

Fourthly, 'Hell' (*gehenna*) is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew (*gai' hinnom*), meaning the Valley of Hinnom or of Groaning. Today, the Hinnom Valley is a beautiful landscape a short walk from the Old City of Jerusalem through its southern gates, and in this delightful green space you can enjoy a quiet time. The photo above tells the current story. However, its beauty today belies a bloody past in which Israel's kings, priests and prophets, offered up their sons and daughters to Molech (Jeremiah 7:31-32).

Molech was an Ammonite deity, immortalised in giant metal statues of a man with a bull's head, a hole in the abdomen and outstretched forearms that made a kind of ramp to the hole (see picture at right). Worship of Molech included the sacrifice by fire of living children. A fire was lit in or around the statue and babies were placed in the statue's arms or in the hole, and when a couple sacrificed their firstborn, they believed that Moloch would ensure financial prosperity for the family and future children. And, priests would beat drums to drown out the screams of the children for the benefit of the parents.

This worship of the false god Molech was a violation of the first commandment of preferring other gods to the Lord Who promised to bring a disaster on Hinnom, so He renamed it the Valley of Killing (Jeremiah 19:1ff). The Jewish killers of the Lord's time who lived a stone's throw from these events would recognise the allusion to Israel's history, and they, as opponents of Him and His apostles, preferring other gods to Christ, need to be in awe of Him if they wanted to avoid being exterminated.

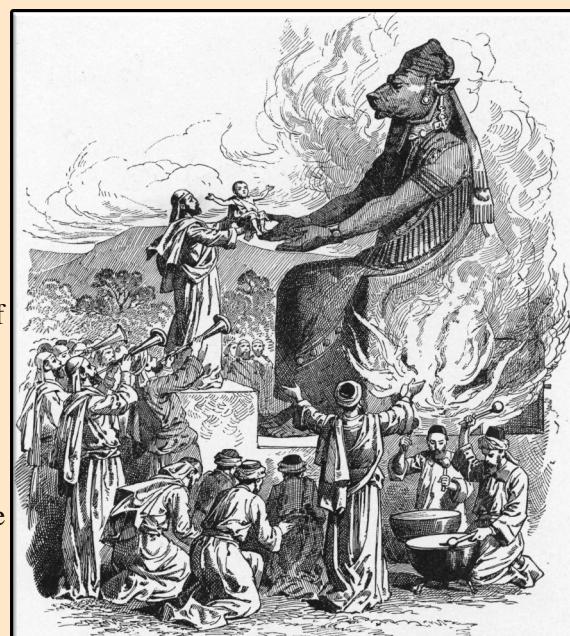
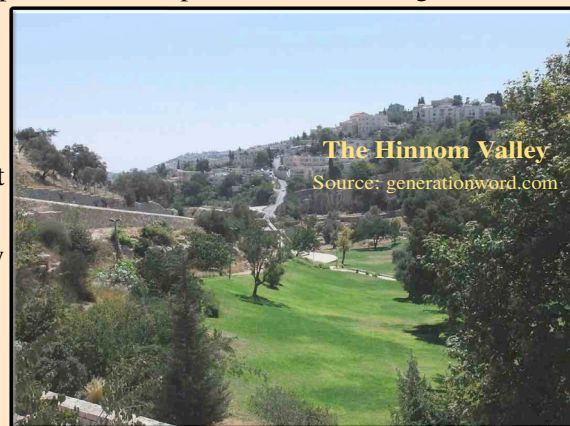
Fear not 3

*Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. **Fear not (phobeo)** therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31).*

Sparrows were sold at the smallest price fetched by any game. It was also the smallest living creature offered in sacrifice under the Mosaic dispensation. It was the gift for the poor leper ([Pulpit Commentaries](#)). Sparrow (*strouthion*) is a diminutive, meaning "thin-ling". Two of these were sold in the marketplace for an *assarion*, which denotes the smallest economic unit and the smallest coin in the Greco-Roman world. An *assarion* was about a tenth to one-sixteenth of a denarius, a day's wage, truly the atoms of economy ([Abarim Publications](#)). So, one sparrow wasn't even worth the smallest coin available meaning that one sparrow couldn't even be sold. Whoever wanted one, had to buy two.

Then the Lord says something, seemingly unrelated to sparrows: *But the very hairs of your head are all numbered*. What might He be alluding to? Is it the following text about God numbering?

*Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and **numbers** them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing (Isaiah 40:26)*



"Offering to Molech" in Bible Pictures and What They Teach Us, by Charles Foster, 1897.

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Fear not 3 continued

Sparrows and the starry heavens! The very small and the very large and beautiful. One animate life and the other inanimate. Our heavenly Father cares for the valueless sparrows, and in His great power and strength He ensures that not one of myriad heavenly bodies is missing. Now, if the observable universe has 2 trillion galaxies, and each galaxy has 100 billion stars, that's a lot to name and number and care for.

In sum, the Father cares much for the sparrows that have little value, and for His apostles that have more value. Perhaps, then, His 'fear not' was to allay their concern that the Father would not value them as they hoped.

Fear not 4

*And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, **Fear not (phobeo)**; from now on you will catch alive men (Luke 5:10).*

The background to this statement was an occasion when the crowd was pressing in on Christ to hear the word of God as He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. So, He took an empty boat for a platform and taught the people. At the end of His sermon, He commanded Simon to retreat into the deep and carefully lower the nets for a catch.

Simon protested because they had been fishing all night and caught nothing, but he did it anyway, and collectively captured a crowded mass (*plethora*) of fish, which burst the net. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, demanding that the Lord go out from him for he was an erroneous man. Peter's posture reflects an attitude of awe, and his words convey unworthiness to be connected to the Lord. Also the decision of the remaining apostles to willfully push away from themselves their current lives and join Jesus' path and follow Him in a subservient position, also suggests awe, so the Lord's demand to fear not was effective.

Fear not 5

And there came a man named Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue. And falling at Jesus' feet, he implored Him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying.

*While he was still speaking, someone from the ruler's house came and said, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more." But Jesus on hearing this answered him, **Fear not (phobeo)**: **believe** only, and she shall be made **whole** (Luke 8:41-42,49-50).*

Jairus falls prostrate or upon his face before Jesus showing humility and submission. Hard not to think that the man was in awe of Jesus, as his posture and pleading about his dying daughter conveys. The Lord agreed to go but He was interrupted by the woman seeking healing for a longstanding, isolating medical condition. I wonder what was streaming through the mind of Jairus at the delay caused by the intervention of the woman. And, perhaps worst still when he got the news that his daughter had died. She was beyond help. There was nothing that even the Master could do, so do not trouble Him any further. His heart must have sunk within him. He was too late to save his daughter.

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Fear not 5 continued

The Lord's reassuring 'fear not', 'believe only', and 'made whole' was an appeal to the heart of a man who was already in awe of Jesus. '**Believe**' (*pistis*), He said, which is possibly a signature word of the NT meaning the mental substance that results from intelligent and reasonable inquiry or instruction; the mind's response to valuable information. It described sureness in every way, from sureness about salvation to sureness about how to make a club sandwich. Someone's *pistis* did not denote one's religious or political leanings but comprised everything a person was certain of, on whatever level and whatever field, without distinction between scientific, artistic and religious certainties or even little practical certainties to help with daily chores ([Abarim Publications](#)).

The promise that his daughter would be made whole (*sozo*) means to save, being part of a cluster of words that revolves around wholeness and soundness, which is akin to the Hebrew (*shalom*), to be or make whole or complete. That day Jairus saw his daughter become sound and whole, and only reinforced the admiration that he had for Jesus Christ.

Fear not 6

*Jesus said to the crowd, Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Jesus said to his disciples, Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive (desire) for his **kingdom**, and these things will be given to you as well. Fear not (**phobeo**), little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the **kingdom** (Luke 12:15, 22, 30-32).*

The warning for the crowd was against being rich for themselves rather than being rich toward God. For His disciples, the Lord demands that they not be encumbered with concerns for their life - what to eat, or wear, or in what house to live. This is unworthy of being Christian, so leave that to the nations of the world (*kosmos*), the civilised, governed and cultured world to desire.

Instead, the disciples are to have a mind that's firmly grounded in desiring the Father's kingdom. Even though He knew that they need such earthly things, He says imperatively, "Desire the kingdom", and "these things will be added to you". *Desire* is present; *added* is future, the hope of anticipating the advent of His kingdom as the Lord spoke in this text:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread...(Matthew 6:9-11).

The Father's kingdom was then future for the Lord taught His disciples to pray for it. If so, the prayer for daily bread is a request for God's provision in His kingdom. This is a difficult expression, and means something like 'Our bread for tomorrow (*epiousion*), our future bread, give us today.'

[Pett](#) thinks that the best explanation for "tomorrow" is that it refers to the bread of the Messiah's table at the Messianic Banquet. Luke emphasises this by placing before the prayer Jesus receiving food at the house of Martha and Mary, but He directs Martha's attention to the greater importance of spiritual food by listening to His words (Luke 10:38-42). Further, it is followed by a parable which uses 'bread' as a picture of the need to pray for the 'good things' that their heavenly Father has for his children, including the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:5-13).

This kingdom will be set up by the God of Heaven, and it will never be destroyed, crushing and ending all the kingdoms of men and standing forever (Daniel 2:44). It is a universal spiritual empire; of peace, of righteousness, and joy, in which all men will own him as their rightful Sovereign, whose will will then be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

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Fear not 6 continued

Such an exclusive kingdom the disciples are to desire now, because it is their Father's good pleasure to give the kingdom to them with all its divine provisions and blessings. So, He demands that they fear not, neither about the present or the future because 'all these things shall be added unto you'. The disciples are to recognise that the Father is Sovereign, which is incompatible with desiring any of earth's valuable and attractive treasures.

Fear not 7

*The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, Fear not (**phobeo**), daughter of Sion: behold, your King comes, sitting on a donkey's colt (John 12:15).*

The Lord's statement is drawn from Zechariah 9:9-10):

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Notice the differences between what Zechariah wrote and what the Lord said:

1. Zechariah encouraged Jerusalem to 'rejoice greatly', but the Lord said 'fear not'.
2. Zechariah prophesied that 'your king comes to you triumphant and victorious' but the Lord omitted those words, and the following associated words about destroying their war equipment, commanding peace to the nations and His universal dominion.

So, what do we make of this? The Lord is coming to Jerusalem, He says, as Israel's king, but that's all. He isn't coming at this time to eliminate war and to establish global peace. Hence He doesn't encourage them to rejoice.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the ass is portrayed as one of the basic possessions of the Hebrews and their means of transport. The king or ruler used the donkey in peace time and the horse, strong and fearless in battle, for war (Job 39:19ff). Moreover, the horse was a monopoly of kings and nobles, a symbol of human power (see also Psalm 33:17, Hosea 1:7). Clearly, Christ's advent to Jerusalem on the donkey demonstrated a peaceful intention. It is in contrast to His coming on the horse to make war that John saw in his revelation visions (Revelation 19:11).

As [Kinman](#) points out, in the Hellenistic world a parousia most often signalled the coming of a ruler or royal figure. At the approach of the dignitary, a band of municipal officials and other citizens, including the social, religious, and political elite, would proceed some distance from the city to meet the celebrity. It was an occasion for an ostentatious display designed to court the favour of the visiting celebrity.

However, Jerusalem's hardened spiritual condition is epitomised by its failure to recognise its king. He was not met by city officials, nor feted by the leading citizens, nor escorted back to the city. The encounter with the Pharisees was a rejection, and the nonappearance of high priests, other officials, and the citizens of Jerusalem was an affront. This rejection was made even clearer by Luke who has gone to some lengths to stress that Jesus is king, but He is not received as one.

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Fear not 7 continued

The Lord is welcomed and lauded exclusively by a large number of His loyal disciples. As for Jerusalem generally, the King's entry is "a-triumphal." As Luke's readers might have expected, such an affront would have its consequences, and the rejection of Jesus' resulted in the destruction that visited the city in 70 CE.

So, is the Lord's (*phobeo*) to His loyal disciples about anxiety or awe? That crowd of disciples shouted "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!*" That's awe surely. If not awe, His *phobeo* must be a reference to not be anxious. He knew what was coming for the city that would reject Him, and in His last week Christ warned His disciples to flee the mountains when they saw that Jerusalem's destruction was imminent. Every one of them heeded Christ's warning to flee, and at the time, not a disciple was left in the city. This was a flight response to a frightening episode in the experience of God-rejecting Jerusalem, but the Lord ensured that His disciples would be safe.

Fear not 8

*And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. And He laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not (**phobeo**); I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades (Revelation 1:17-18).*

John's prostrate posture followed his the seeing firstborn of the dead, the ruler of kings on earth, the Son of Man identified as the heavenly figure from Daniel 7:13. He saw His long robe, His head and his hair white as snow, His eyes like a flame of fire, His feet like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, His face like the sun shining with full force, the seven stars in His right hand, and the sharp, two-edged sword from His mouth. His voice was like a trumpet, and the roar of many waters,

I think John is in awe and amazement at seeing the ascended Christ in a form sublimely unique and overwhelmingly majestic ([Pulpit Commentary](#)).

Fear not 9

*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life: I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Fear not (**phobeo**) what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:8-10).*

According to [Mounce](#), Smyrna had a famous thoroughfare called the Street of Gold curved around Mt. Pagus (which rose over 500 feet from the harbour) like a necklace on the statue of a goddess. At either end was a temple, one to a local variety of Cybele, a patron divinity, and the other to Zeus. The acropolis on Mt. Pagus was called the crown or garland of Smyrna. Smyrna sustained a special relationship to Rome and the imperial cult, and the city won permission (over ten other Asian cities) to build a temple in honor of the emperor Tiberius. This strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population which was actively hostile to the Christians made it exceptionally difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna. The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was that of the elderly Polycarp, the "twelfth martyr in Smyrna," who, upon his refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, was placed upon a pyre to be burned.

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Fear not 9 continued

In the Lord's salutation to Smyrna Christ identifies himself appropriately as the Sovereign One, victorious over death, who died and came to life again so they too can face martyrdom knowing that faithfulness is rewarded with eternal life. Further, the Lord knows the burden that crushes and stark poverty suggesting a close connection between the two, for in an antagonistic environment it would be difficult for the Christian to make a living, and thus many were economically destitute. Christ is also aware of the slanderous accusations directed against the believers by the Jewish population at Smyrna. The Martyrdom of Polycarp documents this hostility most clearly. The Jews were a synagogue of Satan.

Accordingly, the Lord's use of *phobeo* concerns the anxiety of persecution. The reward for faithfulness is the crown of life, not the royal crown (the diadema), but the wreath or garland (the stephanos) which was awarded to the victor at the games. Perhaps the imagery is suggested by the circle of colonnaded building on the crest of Mt. Pagos called the crown of Smyrna.

Conclusion

In the disciplines of Biology and Psychology, there seems to be no consensus about what "fear" is. In contrast, the Bible's theology of fear is clear as to its origin - fear is the product of sin?

The most frequently used word in the Hebrew Bible is 'yirah', which sometimes expresses fright, while in other contexts, "yirah" denotes reverence, and respect. That is, it can mean anxiety or awe, and the context of use is determinative. Similarly, in the New Testament the most frequently used word is *phobeo*, meaning to put to flight by scaring away, but it can also mean awe, revere, adore, or admire.

The Lord has the solution to mankind's fear for multiple times in the Hebrew Bible the Lord told humans, to 'fear not' because of what He is, and what He will do. Once again, in the New Testament Jesus Christ encouraged humans, to 'fear not' because of what He is, and what He will do.

In sum, elimination of fear is not self-generated, but God-generated, for His promises as the "I am", and "I will", and "I have" are fear eradicators. As the Preacher put it:

Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear (yirah) God, because they stand in fear ((yirah) before him, but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear (yirah) before God (Ecclesiastes 8:12-13).



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