

Article

Ancient Travellers, Intercultural Contact, and the Fear of Gods

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Abstract: Although the fear of Yhwh has been presented as an intrinsic feature of the ancient Israelite religion, the fear of God(s) is not limited to the people of Israel in the Hebrew Bible, and similar ideas of fearing deities occur in various texts produced by neighbouring cultures in the ancient eastern Mediterranean. This article investigates the prosocial role of this virtue in situations of human mobility and intercultural contact in the light of the Hebrew Bible and the *Odyssey*. First, I analyse those Hebrew Bible texts in which the fear of God(s) characterizes or is presented as being intelligible to non-Israelite people in situations involving movement and cultural encounter (Gen 20:11; 42:18; Exod 1:17, 21; Deut 25:18; Jon 1:9). Second, I explore the fear motif in other texts from the ancient eastern Mediterranean region and argue that biblical scholars have overlooked illuminating intertexts found in ancient Greek literature. I especially highlight the interpretative importance of the *Odyssey*, which frequently stresses the prosocial role of the virtue of fearing deities in the context of travel and contact with outsiders. In so doing, the *Odyssey* helps us see how the Hebrew Bible texts portraying the fear of God(s) as a universalistic virtue are rooted in and belong to a broader ancient Mediterranean milieu.

Keywords: fear of deities; Hebrew Bible; the *Odyssey*; human mobility; travel; migration; intercultural contact; prosocial behaviour; hospitality; virtue ethics; universalism



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1. Introduction

While the fear of Yhwh is sometimes presented as a hallmark of ancient Israelite thought,¹ this article investigates the fear of deities as a universalistic virtue in the ancient eastern Mediterranean world and examines the idea's cross-cultural dimension in the Hebrew Bible and the wider cultural context of this corpus.² The textual analysis will specifically focus on biblical texts narrating situations of travel and intercultural contact because such literary accounts provide the central locus for the clearly universalistic notions of the fear of God(s) in the Hebrew Bible. In what follows, I therefore ask: How do biblical authors imagine the fear of God(s) as a virtue that is not limited to their own ethnic and religious group but entails broader ethical resonance and validity? How do others imagine the fear of God(s) for themselves? What do biblical ideas concerning the fear of God(s) as a universalistic virtue look like when set into a dialogue with texts produced by neighbouring cultures? Although I will be able to answer these broad questions only to a limited extent in the context of this article, I hope to demonstrate a major gap in previous Hebrew Bible studies focused on the fear motif. I will introduce a crucial yet previously overlooked intertext hailing from the ancient Greek world, the *Odyssey*, and show its relevance for our understanding of the fear idiom's ethical and prosocial association. Before proceeding to analyse the primary sources, however, I will briefly review recent research on scholarly views of the biblical fear idiom, in order to establish the connection between the fear of deities and ethics in the context of the Hebrew Bible.

2. What Does It Mean to Fear a Deity?

As is well known, the basic meaning of the Hebrew root ירא "to fear, be afraid",³ and it has been observed that 80% of the verb's occurrences in the Hebrew Bible take the

deity as its object (see [Lasater 2019](#), p. 50). It is not obvious, however, what it means to fear God(s).

Scholars often point out that the meaning of fear in the Hebrew Bible goes beyond fright, involving awe and respect. An influential interpretation since Rudolf Otto has been that the question is about a feeling of the numinous, “a common human response to the sacred” ([Lasater 2019](#), p. 27; see also [Otto 1959](#), pp. 87–97). Many studies published in recent decades continue to build on the assumption that holiness and fear are interlinked in the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., [Smith 2001](#), p. 94; [Sommer 2009](#), pp. 36, 97–98, 120, 143). Phillip Lasater, however, shows that the linguistic evidence rarely indicates connections between the two Hebrew roots. Instead of the root קדש denoting holiness, the root ירא (“to fear”) tends to appear together with roots denoting greatness such as גדל (“to be big”) or רבה (“to increase”) (e.g., Ps 89:7–8; 96:4–6; 1 Chr 16:25–27). Since the objects of fear are typically deities, kings, other superiors, or imperial forces, Lasater argues that fear can be characterized as “a response to greatness” ([Lasater 2019](#), pp. 29–34, 50, 219). It serves to articulate the correct position of human beings when they encounter something authoritative or even transcendent ([Lasater 2019](#), p. 223).

Lasater’s insightful textual analysis urges biblical scholars to move away from feeling-oriented interpretations of the verb ירא, which does not typically denote irrational dread in the Hebrew Bible (similarly [Barton 2014](#), p. 157). The meaning of the root ירא is not reducible to a feeling or an affective experience, as the question is also about rational, intentional, and normative activity such as responses to various hierarchies of power (see [Lasater 2019](#), pp. 1, 4, 24, 34, 219, 221–22). Likewise, in many ancient Hebrew writings, the fear of God(s) does not prompt irrational reactions but rather characterizes deliberate ethical behaviour and is depicted to result in desired outcomes such as divine blessings, prosperity, and well-being.⁴

Although scholarly views of the biblical fear idiom have become more nuanced in recent years, previous studies have largely concentrated on the fear of Yhwh, i.e., the act of fearing Israel’s deity.⁵ This has led to an (over)emphasis on the idiom’s Israelite hue and to the outshining of its more universalistic connotation. To provide a corrective, I wish to highlight and discuss the cross-cultural relevance of the virtue of fearing God(s) in the Hebrew Bible and its wider eastern Mediterranean context. In so doing, I build on Lasater’s observation that the fear of a deity is a verbal phenomenon, i.e., something people are depicted to actively do in biblical narratives ([Lasater 2019](#), p. 10). Yet I demonstrate that biblical scholars have not adequately acknowledged (1) the role of intercultural contact in the Hebrew Bible texts addressing the fear of God(s); and (2) the diverse—both moral and epistemic—connotations of this virtue in these texts.

3. The Fear of God(s) and Intercultural Contact in the Hebrew Bible

All six Hebrew Bible texts associating the fear of God(s) with non-Israelite people are narratives outlining either exemplary figures or (un)desirable behaviour (see Gen 20:11; 42:18; Exod 1:17, 21; Deut 25:18; Jon 1:9; Job 1:1, 8). Markedly, the authors use the phrase “fear of God(s)” (יראת אלהים) instead of the more particularistic phrase “fear of Yhwh” (יראת יהוה) in all these cases (see [Kugel 1999](#), pp. 255–56; [Goodfriend 2012](#), p. 36). Apart from the book of Job, they concern situations in which travellers or members of a migrant population are portrayed as being in contact with “others”, which urges me to explore how the former react to and are received in new places.⁶ While the occurrences of the phrase “fear of God(s)” in Job 1 are excluded from the following analysis because of the text’s lack of focus on human mobility and intercultural contact, I should note that the book of Job, too, presents the fear of God(s) as a universalistic virtue. The protagonist is introduced as a man from Uz,⁷ i.e., as a non-Israelite person, and he is explicitly associated with the desirable quality of being god-fearing along with other virtues (see Job 1:1, 8).⁸

3.1. Exemplary Foreigners and the Fear of God(s)

The fear of God(s) seems to be associated with foreigners in the beginning of Exodus. The question is about a story in which the possession of this specific virtue serves as an impetus to challenge the pharaoh's royal order.⁹ The Hebrews are portrayed as a minority people living in a foreign land, and the Egyptian ruler gives a cruel command to two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: while helping the Hebrew women in delivery, they must verify the child's sex and kill all the newborn males (Exod 1:15–16). Yet, the narrator explains, “the midwives feared the God(s)” (וַתִּירָאֵן הַמִּיָּלְדוֹת אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים) and did not follow the royal order, letting all the new-born babies live (Exod 1:17).¹⁰

Admittedly, it remains unclear whether Shiphrah and Puah are Hebrew or Egyptian since the phrase *לְמִיָּלְדוֹת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת* used in Exod 1:15 could mean either “to the midwives of the Hebrew women” or “to the Hebrew midwives” (see Becker 1965, p. 196). The women's Semitic names, together with their brave opposition to the pharaoh, might suggest that they are Hebrew.¹¹ From a narrative viewpoint, however, they are more likely to be Egyptian, as the pharaoh would hardly expect the Hebrews to kill their own people (see Sarna 1986, p. 25). Some early readers, too, understood the story in this way, as is shown by Josephus' rewritten account of the event (*Ant.* 2.206). Josephus' version obviously does not prove my reading, for he is free to retell the story as he likes. It nevertheless highlights the ambiguity of the Hebrew text, which does not specify the midwives' ethnicity and thus allows for an interpretation that they were Egyptians (cf. Lavee 2022).

All in all, the fear of God(s) possessed and performed by Shiphrah and Puah serves to promote the good of the Hebrews in Egypt, regardless of the midwives' ethnicity. This incident has been called the first recorded case of civil disobedience to defend a moral cause, and the author may wish to emphasize the women's admirable action by mentioning their first names (Sarna 1986, p. 25). The remark that the midwives received a divine reward for their courage in the form of their own families (Exod 1:21) also indicates appreciation and recognition of their courageous act.¹²

3.2. Expected and Executed Failures of Fear

While the story in Exodus 1 celebrates Shiphrah's and Puah's exemplary fear of God(s), two texts found elsewhere in the Pentateuch draw attention to an actual or expected failure in the implementation of this particular virtue. In both cases, the Hebrews are depicted to stay in geographical areas associated with the Amalekites, who are often presented as their enemies in the Hebrew Bible.¹³

Genesis 20, to begin with, depicts the time of Sarah and Abraham in the city of Gerar, where the migrant couple interacts with Abimelech, the local king. Abraham calls Sarah his sister and Abimelech takes her to live with him (Gen 20:2).¹⁴ In his dream, however, Abimelech discovers that he had taken the wife of another man, and God tells him to return Sarah to Abraham in order to avoid death (Gen 20:2–7). When Abimelech enquires after Abraham's motive for presenting Sarah as his sister, Abraham replies: “I thought that there is no fear of God(s) (אֵין-יִרְאֵת אֱלֹהִים) in this place, and they would kill me because of my wife” (Gen 20:9–11). Abraham then explains his relation to Sarah, and Abimelech returns her to Abraham, providing him with animals and slaves as well (Gen 20:12–15).

The story is concise and told in a laconic manner, as is typical of ancient Hebrew narration, but the fear motif is integral to its inner logic: Abraham explains that he did not expect Gerar's inhabitants to fear God(s). The city's corruption, described as its shortage of fear, is thus connected with the abuse of defenceless migrants (Weiss 2018, p. 136). In Abraham's view, this justifies his decision to present Sarah as his sister; the lie served to save his life (Sarna 1986, p. 25). Abraham's low expectations make sense in the story's wider literary context because Gerar is located in Negeb, known for Amalek's activity in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Gen 14:7) (Lundbom 2013, p. 717). Even though Abraham doubts the locals' willingness to behave in a way that would manifest their fear of God(s), Abimelech is assumed to grasp what Abraham means with such a fear: it denotes common decency and

the proper treatment of migrants, which would stop the local men from killing Abraham in order to take his wife (Goodfriend 2012, p. 36).

While Genesis 20 discusses an anticipated failure of fear at the time of patriarchal migrations, Deuteronomy 25 expresses disappointment at Amalek's lack of god-fearing behaviour during the wilderness wandering when the Hebrews as a people were vulnerable because of not having a permanent place of residence. Deut 25:17 mentions how the Amalekites attacked them after their departure from Egypt (cf. Exod 17:8–13) and then specifies how Amalek, “not fearing God(s) (וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים)”, surprised Israel at its helpless moment, destroying all the stragglers (Deut 25:18). Fear, in other words, is expected from a people group to whom Yhwh has no special relation (Weinfeld 1972, pp. 274–75). Due to lacking it, Amalek is considered to be devoid of basic moral sense and to represent a mode of life that violates core assumptions regarding what it is to be a human.¹⁵ The author then tells his audience to wipe the Amalekites out when entering the land of divine promise (Deut 25:19; cf. Exod 17:14), regarding revenge in the form of mass destruction as a justified response to Amalek's cruel actions.

3.3. Mutual Understandings of the Fear

Two biblical narratives, the Joseph novella and the book of Jonah, present the fear of God(s) as being mutually intelligible in situations of human mobility and intercultural contact, i.e., when the Hebrews meet either real or assumed “others”. In both cases, the virtue in question is associated with the quality of trustworthiness.

Genesis 42 narrates an unexpected family reunion. A famine hits Canaan and Joseph's brothers, except for the youngest one, travel to Egypt in order to buy grain. At the destination, Joseph meets his brothers but does not reveal his identity, instead accusing them of being spies (Gen 42:7–14). Joseph imprisons one of the brothers, while the others may bring rations for the starving households back at home in Canaan if they agree to bring their youngest brother to Egypt (Gen 42:15–20). The brothers express their consent and converse with each other in their own language without knowing that Joseph, with whom they have communicated through an interpreter, understands them (Gen 42:20–24).

Joseph's utterance “Do this and you shall live, for I fear God(s) (וְאֲנִי יָרָא אֱת־הָאֱלֹהִים)” (Gen 42:18) is essential for the present purposes: Joseph invokes his fear of God(s) in order to demonstrate his integrity and trustworthiness to a group of travellers who presume him to be an Egyptian. In so doing, Joseph wishes to win the trust of a group of men who have no idea that they speak with their own brother. The interaction outlined in this scene implies, once again, that the meaning and value of fear is regarded as something people can grasp despite linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences.

The book of Jonah expresses a similar assumption of a link between fear and trustworthiness. The protagonist decides to escape a divine call to prophesy in Nineveh and boards a ship to Tarsus in the opposite direction. Soon thereafter, the sailors of the ship, who are afraid of the raging storm, wish to uncover the reason for the ongoing calamity at sea. When the lot casting reveals that the blame is on Jonah, the foreign sailors wish to know more about the traveller (Jon 1:7–8). Jonah then presents himself as a Hebrew and adds: “I fear Yhwh, the God of heaven (וְאֲנִי יָרָא אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יָרָא), who made both sea and land” (Jon 1:9).¹⁶ The sailors then ask more about the purpose of Jonah's journey and eventually throw him into the water in order to calm the storm (Jon 1:10–15).

Strikingly, Jonah's claim that he fears a deity is presented as perfectly intelligible to the foreign sailors—it does not require any clarification—while Jonah specifies that Yhwh is the same as the “God of heaven”. Once again, the fear of deities is portrayed as something shared by different people groups. Jonah and the sailors understand each other without any difficulty, even if the dramatic events are narrated to make the sailors turn to Jonah's deity in particular. Once the storm calms down, the sailors are said to fear Yhwh, sacrifice to him, and make vows to him (Jon 1:16; cf. 1:5, 10).¹⁷ Certainly, the fear of a deity may mark Jonah's belonging to a specific people group in this passage, but it does also connote

decency and reliability, as Jonah seeks to convince the foreigners of his trustworthiness. Group membership, religious practice, and virtue seem to intersect in the story.

3.4. What Kind of Virtue Is the Fear of God(s)?

As we have seen, a handful of biblical narratives on (un)successful intercultural contact associate the fear of deities with non-Israelite people: Sarah and Abraham, the migrants, hide their relationship because of Abraham's assumption that the locals of Gerar wish to harm him, while Joseph's encounter with his brothers in Egypt counts as intercultural since the brothers do not know the identity of Joseph who claims to be god-fearing. The Egyptian midwives execute their fear of the divine by protecting the new-born Hebrew babies, the non-god-fearing Amalekites are condemned for their brutal attack on vulnerable wayfarers, and the figure of Jonah presents himself as god-fearing to the foreign sailors on whose ship he travels towards Tarsus.

In all these stories, the biblical authors acknowledge the (potential) moral agency of the "other", though two of them also seem to serve as religious propaganda portraying another people group, the inhabitants of Gerar or the Amalekites, as malicious and hostile to the Hebrews (see Gen 20:11; Deut 25:18). The texts reveal a way of thinking in which all humans are expected to recognize their subordinate status in the universe created and ruled by God(s)—and to respond to this cosmic order by demonstrating their fear of a deity or deities in practical action (see Kugel 1999, pp. 255–56; Jindo 2011, p. 449). In essence, this virtue entails common decency that is expected from anyone regardless of one's ethnic, religious, and cultural background and circumstances (cf. Qoh 12:13).¹⁸

Scholars of ethics distinguish between moral and epistemic virtues (and vices), though admitting some overlap between the two. Moral virtues pertain to ideas of goodness and rightness, illustrating one's action, whereas epistemic virtues stand for intellectual qualities or other epistemic excellences of the knowing agent, aiming at achieving truth (see, e.g., Brady and Pritchard 2003, p. 2). Based on the above analysis, however, the distinction does not seem to apply to the fear of God(s), which has both moral and epistemic implications in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. The virtue is associated with (im)moral actions and serves to regulate human behaviour by preventing violence and prompting desirable action.¹⁹ It especially means honouring life (cf., the Egyptian midwives, Gerar's inhabitants, and the Amalekites). Yet the virtue in question also shapes one's epistemic disposition, as is shown by the figures of Joseph and Jonah, who attest the reliability of their words and seek recognition as trustworthy fellow humans by invoking their fear of God(s). In these stories, the fear signals honesty, typically seen as an epistemic virtue.²⁰

4. The Fear of God(s) in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean

Even though the fear of God(s) is integral to the ethical outlook of the Hebrew Bible, there is nothing peculiarly Israelite about the idea *per se*. This point has long been recognized insofar as biblical scholars have extensively studied the occurrence of the fear idiom in the ancient Near Eastern texts. In this section, I briefly discuss the use of the fear idiom in them and then proceed to consider another set of intertexts, the ancient Greek corpus, with a focus on the *Odyssey* and its importance for our understanding of the selected Hebrew Bible texts and their wider cultural context in the ancient Mediterranean milieu. I should stress at the outset that I will be able to examine the context and content of the selected primary sources only briefly here. Moreover, I do not claim to present an exhaustive treatment of the topic as regards either the range of ancient ideas concerning the fear of deities or possible points of contact between Greek and Hebrew/Jewish texts that exhibit such an idea. Yet, despite the obvious limitations of this investigation, I wish to demonstrate a significant parallel between the Hebrew Bible texts discussed above and the *Odyssey*. The topic, however, warrants further study beyond the case presented here.

4.1. Ancient Near Eastern Texts

In the ancient Near Eastern writings, the language of fear is generally used to express hierarchical relationships and related behaviour in both royal and religious contexts.²¹ As regards those cases in which a human being's fear is specifically directed at a deity or deities, it has been observed that the fear idiom tends to revolve around two themes, (1) relations between rulers and deities and (2) the performance of cultic duties.²²

First, rulers are often presented as god-fearing and thus accountable to the divine sphere. In the Code of Hammurabi (18th c. BCE), Hammurabi famously presents himself as god-fearing to affirm his commitment to protect the vulnerable.²³ The question is about "a virtue—obedience to the principles of justice—which equips him for the task for which the gods chose him" (see Gruber 1990, p. 415). To take another example, Cyrus is portrayed as a fearer of Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon, in the Cyrus cylinder (ca. 539 BCE) that documents his deeds and marks the establishment of the Persian rule.²⁴

Second, various instructional texts address fear while discussing piety and its rewards. Two examples from the Middle Babylonian period (1600–1100 BCE) are informative in this respect. In the Babylonian Theodicy, one of the friends explains to the suffering person that "the humble man who fears (*pāliḥ*) his goddess accumulates wealth" (20–22).²⁵ Similarly, the Counsels of Wisdom posits that a god-fearing person who prays and sacrifices will receive favour and a long life.²⁶ Both of these texts associate the fear of deities with blessings.²⁷ Fear involves both submission to superior beings and proper cultic activity; the question is about "something felt and something practiced" at once.²⁸

The ancient Near Eastern parallels add to our understanding of the biblical fear idiom but do not cover its full spectrum. They reveal continuities between texts of the Hebrew Bible and ancient royal and cultic ideologies, especially illuminating the idiom's submissive and hierarchical aspect. They do not, however, sufficiently explain its prosocial dimension and implications. To understand this aspect of the fear idiom, especially in terms of travel and intercultural contact, we must turn to ancient Greek literature.

4.2. Ancient Greek Texts

The idea of fearing deities or divine power shapes aspects of the ancient Greek culture.²⁹ According to F. S. Naiden, it inspires ritual, thus contributing to the cult, and urges one to honour the divinely sanctioned customs of *ξενία* or guest-friendship, having social and ethical relevance.³⁰ The latter context of the fear idiom is integral to this investigation. In what follows, I hope to illuminate its importance by discussing the *Odyssey*, the epic poem about Odysseus' eventful return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War, which contains several passages that virtually identify hospitality with the trait of being god-fearing (see Yamagata 1993, p. 5). Though the fear idiom is by no means restricted to the *Odyssey* in the ancient Greek literature, I limit the discussion to this particular work because of its extended use of the fear idiom in the context of ethical obligations related to travel and contact with outsiders.

The motif of fearing deities occurs for the first time in the account of Odysseus' arrival in the island of Scheria. The protagonist is trapped on the island of the nymph Calypso, but he is eventually allowed to leave it after Hermes, the protector of travellers, urges Calypso to let him go. Odysseus then builds a raft, sails the sea for days, and nearly reaches Scheria before a storm sent by Poseidon wrecks his raft. Odysseus is able to reach the shore, however, as the river god postpones his flow, and he finds a place to rest (*Od.* 5.145–493). Waking up in the woods, Odysseus wonders about his new setting:

What is this country I have come to now? Are all the people violent (ὄβρισταί) and wild (ἄγριοι), not at all well-behaved (οὐδὲ δίκαιοι)? Or are they hospitable (φιλόξεينوι), and god-fearing (καί σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεουδέης)? (*Od.* 6.119–121)³¹

Odysseus' reaction to his new environment is natural considering his vulnerability as a disorientated traveller. Not knowing where he is, Odysseus hopes that the voices he hears come from a benevolent source, and a positive intercultural contact soon takes place when Odysseus meets Nausicaa, the Phaeacian princess and King Alcinous' daughter, who

expresses her care for the “unfortunate wanderer” and exhorts her servants to feed and wash him (*Od.* 6.206–210).

This passage connects the quality of being god-fearing with goodness and hospitality or guest welcome (ξενία), which is a recurrent motif in the *Odyssey*.³² In fact, the account of Odysseus’ arrival in Scheria came to function as a paradigmatic expression of true hospitality in the ancient Greek tradition.³³ “The underlying thought”, Naoko Yamagata explains, “is that travellers are supposed to be protected by the gods”. Especially Zeus is considered to take care of guests and strangers—and to punish those ignoring hospitality.³⁴ Moreover, it is essential to fear deities and treat strangers with respect as the latter could be deities in disguise, or messengers of deities, and one must seek the favour of deities who may punish those not respecting them and traditional customs.³⁵

The fear of divine beings and hospitality are likewise associated with each other—as well as being contrasted with immoral behaviour—in another scene that outlines interaction between Odysseus and the Phaeacians. In this passage, King Alcinous exhorts the guest:

But come now, tell me about your wanderings: describe the places, the people, and the cities you have seen. Which ones were cruel (χαλεποί) and wild (ἄγριοι), not at all well-behaved (οὐδὲ δίκαιοι), and which were hospitable (φιλόξεينوι) and god-fearing (καί σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεουδέης)? (*Od.* 8.571–576)

This scene shows how hospitality is often blind in the *Odyssey*, i.e., the master is expected to feed and keep company with the stranger already before finding out who the guest is.³⁶ In addition, it is remarkable that Alcinous is portrayed as being concerned with Odysseus’ treatment during his journey, and the traveller tells his eventful story to the king. Two incidents recalled by Odysseus are relevant to the present study, and both of them are related to “the country of the reckless Cyclopes” (cf. *Od.* 9.107).

First, prior to their arrival at the Cyclopic island, Odysseus is said to have addressed his men as follows:

My loyal friends! Stay here, the rest of you, while with my boat and crew I go to check who those men are, find out if they are violent (ὕβρισται) and wild (ἄγριοι), not at all well-behaved (οὐδὲ δίκαιοι), or hospitable (φιλόξεينوι) and god-fearing (καί σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεουδέης). (*Od.* 9.172–176)

Again, the fear of deities is invoked to provide a contrast to uncivilized conduct. Those who fear divine beings are regarded as considerate and assumed to know social customs such as hospitality, while uncultured people are considered to be harsh and wild like animals (Yamagata 1993, p. 65). A comparison with the passages discussed above shows that the formulation is actually the same as in *Od.* 6.120–121 and nearly identical to the formulation in *Od.* 8.574–576. The repetitive nature of the accounts suggests that the cluster of virtues and vices mentioned in the text passages is not accidental but conveys a constellation of related ethical concepts.

Second, Odysseus and his men are soon after narrated to meet a local giant, Polyphemus. Speaking to Polyphemus in whose cave he and his men are trapped, Odysseus asks the giant to obey customs and grant them a gift, thus showing respect to the deities; he also claims that Zeus is on their side, taking care of visitors and those in need (*Od.* 9.259–271).³⁷ Given that the customs of hospitality are presented as divinely dictated, inhospitality appears as a transgression of the divine will. Polyphemus scoffs at Odysseus, however, and defies the rules of hospitality:

Well, foreigner, you are a fool, or from some very distant country. You order me to fear the gods (ὄς με θεοὺς κέλεαι ἢ δειδίμεν ἢ ἀλέασθαι)! My people think nothing of that Zeus ... nor any god; our strength is more than theirs. If I spare you or spare your friends, it will not be to avoid the hatred of Zeus. (*Od.* 9.273–279)

In the interaction described in this passage, Polyphemus’ lack of fear emerges as arrogant speech and as the rejection of Zeus’ authority; Polyphemus perhaps seeks recognition

for his proximity on the divine hierarchy. In addition, the lack of fear is associated with violence, as is shown by Polyphemus' subsequent deed of killing two of Odysseus' men.

Odysseus' encounters with the Phaeacians and Polyphemus amply demonstrate the presumed ethical implications of the fear of God(s) in terms of interaction with outsiders, but the same theme resumes when Odysseus finally arrives in Ithaca. Having fallen asleep on the journey, which took place on a magical ship granted to him by the Phaeacians, Odysseus wakes up on his home island but does not recognize the place because of Athena's trick to cast a mist upon it. He sobs as follows:

Where am I now? Are those who live here violent (ὕβριστᾶί) and wild (ἄγριοι), not at all well-behaved (οὐδὲ δίκαιοι)? Or are they hospitable (φιλόξεينوι) and god-fearing (καί σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεουδής)? (*Od.* 13.200–203)

Odysseus' words are identical to those he delivered in Scheria (*Od.* 6.119–121). The fear of deities is again associated with the kind treatment of strangers and being contrasted with violence.

Some of Odysseus' encounters on the island of Ithaca are positive. His meeting with Eumaeus the swineherd and slave of Odysseus demonstrates Eumaeus' respect for the customs of hospitality, even if he lacks material resources and does not recognize his old master (*Od.* 14).³⁸ Markedly, Odysseus receives hospitality from Eumaeus despite identifying himself as Cretan (*Od.* 14.199), i.e., a member of a group known as liars in the Greek tradition.³⁹ It is further remarkable that Odysseus, in his made-up tale to Eumaeus, gives an account of his time in Egypt. He claims that the local population had tried to kill him, while an Egyptian king protected him for "he had reverence for the wrath of Zeus Xenios (Διὸς δ' ὠπίζετο μῆνιν ξεινίου), who above all hates wicked deeds" (*Od.* 14.283–284). Although the question is about a made-up tale, Odysseus' statement is meant to be credible and reflects a universalistic expectation that the fear of Zeus Xenios (i.e., Zeus, the deity of strangers) is shared by Greeks and Egyptians. The passage also appears to echo the ancient Near Eastern ideal that rulers ought to be god-fearing; a right attitude towards the divine realm and related prosocial deeds are part of their duties and exemplarity.

Another positive encounter concerns Odysseus' meeting with Eurycleia, the old slave woman who had brought Odysseus up. Similarly to Eumaeus, Eurycleia does not recognize the traveller disguised as a beggar but nevertheless takes good care of him. In this context, Eurycleia further characterizes Odysseus as god-fearing, lamenting how Zeus, the deity associated with ξενία and regarded as the protector of strangers, had hated Odysseus in spite of his exemplarity (*Od.* 19.363–366). Here, too, the fear idiom is embedded in a hospitality context, as an encounter with the unrecognized stranger makes Eurycleia think of her absent master and his virtue.

Odysseus' homecoming scene, on the contrary, underlines how Penelope's suitors lack respect for the traveller in disguise (*Od.* 17.336–491).⁴⁰ Just as Polyphemus, they violate the customs of hospitality, trying to strike Odysseus.⁴¹ This makes the master in disguise resort to violence in his own home. The fear of deities is mentioned once more in the poem, as Odysseus reveals his identity to the suitors just before striking a fatal bow:

Dogs! So you thought I would not come back home from Troy? And so you fleeced my house, and raped my slave girls, and you flirted with my wife while I am still alive! You did not fear the gods (οὔτε θεοὺς δεισάντες) who live in heaven, and you thought no man would ever come to take revenge. (*Od.* 22.35–40, cf. 20.215)

Odysseus thus condemns the suitors by invoking their lack of fear and kills them brutally. He acts in avenging fury to destroy those who do not fear the deities they ought to fear and kills an entire generation of men on his home island. While Odysseus' retaliatory act causes a chaotic massacre, it also serves to restore order to a place in which the guests had breached the rules of hospitality by usurping the role of a host and by abusing the household of the absent master (see [Pitt-Rivers 2012](#), p. 517; [Heffernan 2014](#), p. 22).

As we have seen, travel scenes provide the central locus of fear idiom in the *Odyssey*. The fear of deities is repeatedly highlighted as the protagonist comes to new places and meets people who do not either know or recognize him. In these scenes, the fear of deities is closely tied with generous care and virtually identified with hospitality, the proper treatment of host–guest relations. Those who fear deities are civilized and presumed to know social conventions as opposed to harsh, wild, and violent people.⁴²

4.3. The Hebrew Bible and the *Odyssey*

As I hope to have shown, the *Odyssey*, along with its emphasis on fear’s ethical and benevolent implications, appears to be a crucial intertext to the Hebrew Bible stories in which fear is expected from various people groups and portrayed as having or expected to have prosocial outcomes. The biblical texts hail from the Southern Levant, and there is no reason to assume a direct point of contact between them and the *Odyssey* as regards the occurrence and presentation of the fear motif, even though the interconnections between the ancient Hebrew and Greek traditions generally merit further inquiry.⁴³

Although the question is not about direct influence, the ancient Greek tradition is crucial to our understanding of the biblical narratives on fear in situations of human mobility and intercultural contact because it shows that they have broader cross-cultural resonance than has hitherto been recognized in scholarship. The stories of the Hebrew Bible resonate with ancient Near Eastern texts regarding the fear’s hierarchical aspect and connection with blessings, but they also depict it as a virtue shaping human behaviour; the question is not just about a reaction but also (or even primarily) about a characteristic to be cultivated for the benefit of another person and the wider community. Reading the Hebrew Bible together with the *Odyssey* helps us better grasp this prosocial dimension of the fear of God(s).

Both the Hebrew Bible and the *Odyssey* hail from the ancient eastern Mediterranean milieu and share certain cultural values. Acknowledging the importance of fearing deities is one tangible way to say that the ancient Hebrew and Greek traditions have somewhat comparable worldviews without being the same. Both assume that a god-fearing person worships someone and acknowledges the divine sphere and its general authority. Interestingly, both the biblical texts and the relevant passages of the *Odyssey* tend to use rather generic expressions that do not specify the proper name(s) of the deity or deities to be feared. Yet, in the case of the *Odyssey*, the context may indicate that the question is about the fear of Zeus (see *Od.* 9.275, 277; 19.363, 365), which warns against overemphasizing the similarity related to the generic use of divine epithets.

Another parallel between the ancient Hebrew and Greek traditions concerns the ethical and prosocial implications of the virtue at stake: in both cases, the fear of deities is expected to bring about respect, care, and hospitality.⁴⁴ As such, the quality is central to situations of travel and intercultural contact and closely related to the phenomenon of hospitality or guest welcome, as the *Odyssey* highlights.⁴⁵ The lack of fear, on the contrary, is considered to manifest itself as immoral, uncivilized, and violent behaviour. Markedly, it is also used to justify violent assault and massacre in both Hebrew and Greek traditions, as is shown by the accounts of Penelope’s suitors (*Od.* 22.34–41) and the Amalekites (Deut 25:18–19).

In spite of the thematic and conceptual parallel, the Hebrew and Greek accounts discussed above remain rather different from a literary point of view. The relevant narratives of the Hebrew Bible employ the verb “to fear” (ירא) and associate it with the generic term “God(s)” (אלהים), although the exact meaning of god-fearing behaviour varies in these texts. Meanwhile, the relevant sections of the *Odyssey* revolve around the protagonist’s encounters on the move and are very repetitive in character; in many cases, the text uses the same terms that virtually constitute a fixed formula. In the *Odyssey*, moreover, the association between the fear of deities and exemplary moral behaviour is primary, whereas the biblical fear idiom concerns both moral and epistemic virtues.

Another difference appears to concern the object of fear in the selected sources. The biblical texts assume that the Hebrews (ought to) worship Yhwh, whereas other people groups have and revere their own deities. Meanwhile, the *Odyssey* with its explicitly polytheistic tradition seems to expect that all human beings share and revere the same deities headed by Zeus (cf., the remarks on *Od.* 14.283–284 above).⁴⁶ The ancient Hebrew and Greek traditions are certainly not identical, therefore, but nonetheless relatively close to each other in their ethical ways of thinking as regards the fear motif. This observation invites further investigation into (dis)similar patterns of religious thought and ethical paradigms across the ancient eastern Mediterranean cultures.⁴⁷

5. Conclusions

In the Hebrew Bible, the fear of God(s) is presented as a virtue that is not limited to one ethnic or religious group but entails broader ethical relevance and validity. In their surveys of the fear motif, biblical scholars have long focused on the interpretative potential of the ancient Near Eastern sources that stress the importance of submissive behaviour and cultic duties, thus connecting the fear idiom with a proper relation to the divine sphere. I have argued in this article that the *Odyssey* too must be added to the conversation since the epic poem helps us understand another integral aspect of the fear: its prosocial role in situations of travel and cultural encounter. Even though there is no reason to assume direct influence between the ancient Hebrew and Greek traditions regarding the fear motif, reading the Hebrew Bible in dialogue with the *Odyssey* demonstrates that biblical texts belong to a wider ancient Mediterranean milieu in which the fear of deities appears as a central virtue with ethical implications related to the treatment of another (and the “other”) human being. A god-fearing person grasps their place in a cosmic order, as well as treating others with respect and showing decency in their interaction with people across ethnic and cultural boundaries. To be god-fearing, in other words, involves the avoidance of violence and respect for the bodily integrity of an outsider. Moreover, it entails hospitality, the act of taking care of another person’s basic needs such as food and shelter, and the desirable qualities of being honest and reliable. Overall, the virtue of fearing deities means behaving well while taking into consideration divine expectations and acknowledging the superiority of deities for whom mortal humans are accountable.

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Notes

- ¹ Gerhard von Rad, for instance, famously argued that the fear of Yhwh contains the Israelite “theory of knowledge” in a nutshell. See (von Rad 1972, p. 67).
- ² With the term “universalistic” I mean something that neither is conditioned by one’s socialization in a specific culture nor depends on one’s knowledge of a particular deity. The term “virtue”, in turn, stands for a human quality regarded as good and thus desirable. On virtues as good qualities of character, see, e.g., (Swanton 2003, p. 19).
- ³ For an overview, see (Clines 2003, pp. 57–92).
- ⁴ See, e.g., Deut 6:2–3; Ps 128:1–2; Prov 14:27; Jer 32:39–40; Sir 1:11–20.
- ⁵ This idiom is especially characteristic of Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic literature and wisdom texts. See, e.g., (Fuhs 1990, pp. 306–8, 311–13).
- ⁶ While the present investigation focuses on texts that explicitly employ the fear idiom, it should be noted that biblical narratives also discuss travel, hospitality, and human encounters in contexts lacking such an idiom. The stories about Lot (Genesis 19)

and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19) are cases in point. They highlight the primacy of protecting the male guest, even though the latter may implicitly question the overemphasis on hospitality, considering that the woman's extremely brutal and lethal treatment leads to a civil war in the wider narrative context of the book of Judges.

- 7 Only two other biblical passages mention Uz as a geographical place (Lam 4:21; Jer 25:20). The term also features as a personal name denoting persons located in the Transjordan (for a son of Aram, see Gen 10:23; 1 Chr 1:17; for a son of Nahor, see Gen 22:21; for a son of Dishan, see Gen 36:28; 1 Chr 1:42). The ambiguous references enable multiple locations, especially Aramean wilderness (Gen 10:23; 22:21; Joseph, *Ant.* 1.6.4) or the border of Edom and northern Arabia (Gen 36:28; Jer 25:20; Lam 4:21). The rabbinic tradition identifies Uz with Armenia, which was the eastern province of the Byzantine Empire and associated with suffering because of anti-Jewish hostilities. See (Seow 2013, pp. 264–65).
- 8 Note that the list of virtues associated with Job is repeated later, as Yhwh speaks to Satan and asks about his exceptional servant (Job 1:8; 2:3). Satan wonders about why Job would *not* fear a deity who has blessed him and his family, and he acquires a permission to test Job by means of personal trials (Job 1:9–11). The following drama involves conflicting interpretations of suffering, some relying on tradition and others on Job's own experience.
- 9 All the English translations of the Hebrew Bible texts are from the JPS Tanakh, slightly altered. See (JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh 2003).
- 10 In this verse, the author plays with the similarity of two Hebrew verbs, "to fear" (ירא) and "to see, look upon" (ראה). The pharaoh tells the women to "look upon" (וראיתן), whereas the women "fear" (ותיראן) instead. See (Propp 1998, p. 140).
- 11 The name Shiphrah means "beauty", while the likely meaning of Puah is "lass". See (Propp 1998, pp. 137, 139).
- 12 The Hebrew word translated as "families" is בתים, literally "houses" or "households". The women thus seem to have founded lineages after risking their own lives for the sake of saving children. See (Propp 1998, p. 141). This theme creates an inclusion to Exodus 1, which begins with an account of the fertility of Israel's "sons" and ends with another account of mothers and midwives, symbols of the life principle (Exod 1:16, 17, 19, 22). The stress on women's agency also prepares for the following stories on Moses' childhood that involve prominent women (see chs. 2 and 4 of the book). See (ibid., p. 142).
- 13 Amalek is presented as a grandson of Esau (Gen 36:12; 1 Chr 1:36) and thus associated with Edom, though the Amalekites are also connected with other areas, ranging from Negeb and Sinai (Gen 14:7; Num 13:29) to Ephraim (Judg 12:15). The relationship between Israel and Amalek is presented as one of continual warfare (cf. Exod 17:16), including fights in the wilderness (Exod 17:8–15; Judg 10:12; 1 Sam 15:2; cf. Num 24:20) and the arrival to the promised land (Num 14:43–45; cf. Deut 1:41–46). Moreover, numerous clashes take place during the periods of judges and monarchy. See (Lundbom 2013, pp. 715–16).
- 14 Cf. the parallel stories in Gen 12:10–20; 26:1–16. On Sarah and Abraham as migrants who lack financial resources and are willing to resort to the potential benefits of Sarah's sex work, see (Strine 2017, pp. 58–60).
- 15 (Jindo 2011, p. 435). Cf. prophetic oracles against the nations. Lundbom specifically compares the text to Amos 1–2, as these chapters condemn the brutal killing of innocent people. See (Lundbom 2013, p. 717).
- 16 Whether Jonah actually behaves like a god-fearing person is another question. See (Hauser 1985, pp. 27–28).
- 17 See also 1 Sam 4:7 where the Philistines are depicted as fearful when they find out that God has entered the camp in the Ark of the Covenant. On the Philistines as god-fearers, see (Römer 2021, pp. 241–43).
- 18 In the book of Job, however, the fear of God(s) is associated with the high moral standard of perfection. On the fear motif in the book of Qohelet, which gives consideration to "humankind" in general, see (Lasater 2020).
- 19 At the same time, the midwives' moral action may be based on the epistemic virtue of benevolence.
- 20 On honesty and fear of God(s), see also Exod 18:21; 2 Chr 19:7, 9; Neh 7:2. In these texts, fear denotes consciousness and trustworthiness; see (Becker 1965, pp. 197, 202–3).
- 21 (Lasater 2019, p. 42). An element of fear and submission can also be observed in the ancient iconographical material depicting encounters with rulers. See (Strawn 2014, pp. 91–134).
- 22 In other ancient Near Eastern texts, fear is directed at both deities and kings, or only kings. An inscription from the reign of Sargon II (721–705 BCE), for instance, mentions how the king told Assyrians "to teach them [the foreign settlers] correct instructions in fearing gods and king". For the translation, see (Paul 1969, p. 73). The stress on how the fear is to be taught shows that the question is not about a spontaneous experience. See (Lasater 2019, pp. 43–44). As for fear directed at humans, Esarhaddon's vassal treaty (680–669 BCE) calls the vassals to fear the king: "You will ... fe[ar] me and do what is [good] to me". For the translation, see (Parpola 1987, p. 176).
- 23 The text states: "Anum and Enlil named me, to promote the welfare of the people, me, Hammurabi, the devout, god-fearing prince, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak". For the translation, see (Pritchard 1969, p. 164). As this passage shows, kings were regarded as divinely appointed and their task was to provide justice. See (Collins 2019, pp. 171–72).
- 24 For the English translation of the cylinder, see (Pritchard 1969, pp. 315–16). Remarkably, Cyrus the Great's associates are connected with the quality of being god-fearing in the ruler's Greek biography from the fourth century BCE. There is a strong connection between fear, piety, and ethical behaviour in the text portraying them. See Xenophon of Athens, *Cyropaedia* 7.25.
- 25 (Lasater 2019, p. 44). The English translation is from (Pritchard 1969, p. 602).

- 26 See the English translation of the text in (Lambert 1960, p. 105):
 “Prayer, supplication, and prostration
 Offer him daily, and you will get your reward. --
 Reverence (*palahu*) begets favor,
 Sacrifice prolongs life,
 And prayer atones for guilt.
 He who fears the gods (*palih ili*) is not slighted by [...]
 He who fears (*palih*) the Anunnaki extends [his days].”
- 27 On fear and longevity, see also Prov 10:27; 19:23; 22:4. See (Day 1995, p. 67).
- 28 The overlap between norms, feelings, and praxis has been observed by (Lasater 2019, p. 45).
- 29 Yet its importance is not always acknowledged. Barry Strauss, for instance, contrasts the importance of the *polis* in the Greek tradition with that of the temple in the Near East, arguing that “[w]hereas love and fear of God was the central organizing principle of Israel, love and loyalty to the *polis* and its institutions was fundamental to the Greeks”. See (Strauss 2013, p. 22). Certainly, the idea of fearing deities may not be crucial to political thought in ancient Greece, but it is integral to the regulation of human relations in the private sphere (see more below). Moreover, the fear of deities is presented as an ideal of communal life. Consider, for instance, Thucydides’ account of the plague of Athens. Thucydides describes how the situation made people behave in a way that was not restricted by “fear of gods or law of human beings” (θεῶν δὲ φόβος ἢ ἀνθρώπων νόμος) (*History* 2.53). This moralizing portrayal of Athens supports the idea of the fear of deities as a virtue and a means of creating prosocial behaviour in the public sphere.
- 30 See (Naiden 2020, p. 37). On the motif of the fear of deities in inscriptions discovered at sacred spaces, see (Chaniotis 2012, pp. 205–34).
- 31 The English translations of the *Odyssey* are from Emily Wilson’s translation, with minor modifications. See (Homer 2018).
- 32 See, e.g., (Shelmerdine 1969, p. 124; Reece 1992). In the Jewish tradition, Philo of Alexandria, too, connects the ideal of hospitality with Homer (Q.G. 4.20). See (Pearce 2007, pp. 181–82).
- 33 See esp. Euripides, *Cyclops* 299–301; Plutarch, *On Exile* 603d. See (Berthelot 2011, pp. 312–13).
- 34 (Yamagata 1993, p. 5; Pearce 2007, p. 181). Consider, for instance, the swineherd Eumaeus’ reaction as he receives his old master Odysseus (whose identity is unknown to him at the time): “One must honour guests and foreigners and strangers, even those much poorer than oneself. Zeus watches over beggars and guests and strangers” (*Od.* 14.54–57). For further examples, see, e.g., (Arterbury 2005, pp. 31–32).
- 35 See (Leed 1991, pp. 97–98). The theme of disguise is addressed several times in the epic. See *Od.* 1.113–177 on how Telemachus shows hospitality to a stranger (Athena in disguise) by inviting her to his home. In *Od.* 3.31–74, King Nestor welcomes Telemachus, his men, and Athena to his feast in Pylos without knowing their identities. In *Od.* 7.199–212, King Alcinous ponders whether Odysseus is immortal. Penelope’s suitors, too, address the possibility that the beggar (Odysseus in disguise) is a deity (*Od.* 17.482–487). As for Homer’s *Iliad*, consider, for instance, the encounter between Diomedes and Glaucus, two war leaders active in the Trojan War: Diomedes says that he will refuse to fight Glaucus if Glaucus is a deity (*Il.* 6.119–143). For further discussion, see (Smith 1988, pp. 161–78). See also the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 155–160 regarding the honourable treatment of an anonymous woman met at the well, who happens to be Demeter in disguise. Finally, it should be noted that the theme of hospitable welcome of divine visitors occurs in the Hebrew Bible, as well (see Genesis 18–19).
- 36 Yet it does not mean that hospitality would have been free from expectations of reciprocity. See (Heffernan 2014, pp. 14–15).
- 37 Odysseus’ expectation to receive hospitality is ironic here, given that he himself has just violated its rules by entering the giant’s unoccupied cave without permission instead of waiting for an invitation to do so. Odysseus and his men also made use of the resources available in the cave. See (Heffernan 2014, p. 18).
- 38 On Eumaeus as an illustration that Homer does not consider the custom of hospitality to concern only elite members of the society in spite of it being a predominantly upper-class institution, see (Arterbury 2005, pp. 36–37).
- 39 On the motif of Cretans as liars, see Epimenides’ *Cretica*, quoted in Titus 1:12, and Callimachus, *Hymn to Zeus* 8. Odysseus’ Cretan lies are a frequent motif in the epic poem. See, e.g., (Haft 1984, pp. 289–306).
- 40 Regarding travel practices, note how one of Penelope’s slave girls chastises Odysseus for not wanting to sleep in the public shelter (*Od.* 18.327–338). See (Casson 1974, p. 48).
- 41 On the parallel between Polyphemus and the suitors, see (Louden 2010, p. 301).
- 42 As such, the opposite of a god-fearing person can be compared to the conception of a wicked person who does not fear a deity or deities in the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. See (Louden 2010, pp. 244–57).
- 43 Consider, e.g., (Nissinen 2017) on similarities and differences between prophetic traditions in the ancient eastern Mediterranean.
- 44 On hospitality as a virtue that plays a major role in literature and religious traditions but has been ignored in virtue ethics, see (Boisvert 2004, pp. 289–300).

- ⁴⁵ Certainly, hospitality receives considerably more explicit attention in the *Odyssey*, but it also lurks in the background of the selected biblical narratives, even if the Hebrew language lacks a separate category denoting “hospitality”. On hospitality in the Hebrew Bible and beyond, see, e.g., (Arterbury 2005, pp. 55–93; Safren 2012, pp. 157–78; Gudme 2019, pp. 89–108).
- ⁴⁶ On the so-called *interpretatio Graeca*, see, e.g., (von Lieven 2016, p. 61). For further discussion on differences between ethnocentric tribal religions and polytheistic pantheons, which “lend themselves easily to crosscultural translation”, see (Assmann 1997, p. 45).
- ⁴⁷ It should also be noted that the Hebrew Bible certainly is not the only relevant corpus regarding the fear motif in the ancient Israelite/Jewish tradition. On the contrary, future studies on the topic should also consider the Septuagint and early Jewish literature written in Greek. Regarding the fear motif in the Septuagint, see (Wieger 2011). Note also that Philo of Alexandria’s notion of the laws of hospitality that honour strangers has been examined by (Pearce 2007, pp. 197–98).

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