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# AWE AND RESPECT IN THE PSALMS

## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the motif of awe in the Psalms in terms of Buber's outline of mystical awe. In a first section, awe as the beginning of wisdom is analysed, followed by a discussion of the experience of Be-er's<sup>1</sup> (Yahweh's) goodness. In a third section, attention is given to awe as the quiet waiting on Be-er, followed, in a final part, by an analysis of love as the result of awe.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Fear of God" (fear, awe, respect before God) is a fundamental Biblical expression which evokes the area of spirituality as a process that begins with the shocking experience that God is and remains an awesome mystery. This fear of God takes shape in a reverent life and is perfected in a reverent love. It is entirely understandable that in ancient Israel "the fear of God" was virtually synonymous with "piety".<sup>2</sup>

Martin Buber (1962:529-531) regards Biblical piety ("fear of God" or, in German, *Gottesfurcht*) as the origin of all religious existence. Piety has to do with a sphere of fear, awe, trembling, respect and meekness, which Buber characterises as follows: Firstly, piety originates at that moment that existence between birth and death has become incomprehensible and bleak. All certitudes are being disrupted by this mysterious awe. And this not only for a moment, but for good, since it belongs to the essence of the mystery that it is inscrutable. Secondly, this disruption is a dark gate through which we enter into a new, holy existence. We enter a space in which every concrete situation represents a call to live with this mystery. The pious person accepts his life situation as granted to him or her by the Giver. Thirdly, piety regards life, however awesome and incomprehensible it may be, as the countenance of God. Finally, the

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1 For an explanation of this translation of Yahweh and its background, cf. Waaijman (1984 and 2002:431-5). The term, which has its setting in lay spirituality, was a petition for (God's) protective presence. It expresses the pious feeling that Yahweh, or, "Be-er", is with human beings as companion whilst they make life's journey (cf. Waaijman 2002:431).

2 Cf. Waaijman (2002:316); Becker (1965:75) and Plath (1963:122).

pious person loves this reality through the love of God whom he or she has learnt to love. With one or two strokes of the pen, Buber thus expresses the mystical way of Biblical piety. We follow his outline in our exploration of mystical awe and respect in the Psalms.

## 2. THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM IS AWE BEFORE BE-ER (YAHWEH)

The wise of Israel repeatedly describe awe as the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10; Ps. 111:10; Job 28:28; Jes. Sir. 1:24, 20). Awe is the beginning of wisdom because it is evoked by God Self. God's incomprehensibility disrupts our certainties. Where God appears in God's true holiness, God evokes awe. "They praise your great and awesome Name — God is holy" (Ps. 99:3). Our experience that God withdraws from our comprehension evokes awe.<sup>3</sup>

How awesome is Be-er, the Most High,  
the great King over all the earth! (Ps. 47:2).<sup>4</sup>  
For great is Be-er and most worthy of praise,  
to be feared above all gods (Ps. 96:4).

At the same time God is the Most High who brings us to life,

Let all the earth fear Be-er;  
let all the people of the world revere Be-er.  
For Be-er spoke, and it came to be;  
Be-er commanded and it stood firm (Ps. 33:8-9).

Our existence hangs by the silk thread of God's merciful call: "Be there!" This experience is awesome, because it fills us with joy and fear, with gratitude and hope.

Psalm 111 expresses this in a striking manner. The author of this alphabetically structured psalm extols Be-er with the whole heart (v. 1) because Be-er created everything magnificently and designed everything beautifully (vv. 2-3), because his indelible mark can be observed in the miraculous liberation of Israel (vv. 4-5) and because he gave his people a dwelling-place and trustworthy precepts (vv. 6-8). The Psalm not only summarises and lists his works (vv. 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10), but also delineates our response to them. We extol (v. 1), ponder (v. 2), remember (vv. 3-4), receive (v. 6), fear and are in awe (vv. 5, 9, 10) before

3 Cf. how Moses covered his face when God appeared, "for he was afraid to look at God" (Exod. 3:6). When Elijah heard the voice of God, having been struck dumb, he wrapped his face in his mantle (1 Kgs 19:12-3).

4 The translations are taken from the NIV, with some modification.

them. Equally striking is the awe that the psalm evokes. On the one hand the psalm invites all “who fear Be-er” (v. 5) to “ponder his works” (v. 2) and to enter creation and history capturing their meaning. On the other hand the psalm calls to hold him in awe: “Holy and awesome is his Name” (v. 9). Everything that we see and experience is permeated with his awesome Name.

Great are the works of Be-er,  
They are pondered by all who delight in them.  
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,  
And his righteousness endures forever.  
He has caused his wonders to be remembered;  
Be-er is gracious and compassionate (vv. 2-4).

The Name unfolds awesomely in creation and history.<sup>5</sup> It is beautiful to view everything from the perspective of the Name of Be-er. It makes us humble and respectful. The awe that is called the beginning of wisdom in the last verse of the psalm, comprises both trembling and fascination. It means both to retreat and to remain captivated, to shrink back from and to surrender to Him, to be startled by and to longingly reach out to Him.<sup>6</sup>

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
All who follow his precepts have good understanding:  
To Him belongs eternal praise (v. 10).

Wisdom is here described as “understanding,” because it is a wisdom that, standing in awe before Be-er, realises that everything that has been created (including ourselves) can only be “part”-icipated. It is a mystical wisdom that exhausts itself in a never ending celebration. Only the truly fearful person knows that we do nothing. It is, after all, Be-er who is described five times as the One who is “working” or “doing” (vv. 2, 4, 6, 7, 8). We participate in everything only through our trembling before and being fascinated by Him, through standing speechless before and acknowledging Him. In sum, we participate through awe, through our fascination, through being speechless and through acknowledging Him — in short, through awe and respect, through being awoken to mystery and through being drawn into a never ending celebration.

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5 Not just God’s appearance elicits awed respect, but also his action in creation and history, his creative power (Ps. 33:8, 9), deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 14:31), his judicial action (Ps. 76) are experienced as awesome.

6 This paradoxical structure of fear and awe is evident from the fact that piety is used in a parallel manner with words like “trembling”, “shaking”, “dreading”, “being shaken” as well as with terms like “loving”, “adhering to”, “enslaving” and “following”. Cf. Fuhs (1990:290-315).

### 3. TASTE AND SEE THAT BE-ER IS INDEED GOOD

Everyone who enters through the gate of inscrutability into what will from now on be the holy life, will try to understand every situation as a call from the One who is himself Inscrutable. He or she will accept it as a gift from the Giver.

Psalms 34 reveals to us the innermost working of this acceptance in fear. After a call from the psalmist to extol, praise and glorify the Name of Be-er (vv. 1-3), four situations in life are described in which Be-er is being experienced as awesome. The first situation has to do with the personal life of the psalmist: "I sought Be-er and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears" (v. 4). The second life situation refers to the return of Israel from exile: The exiles are radiantly happy (v. 5), as Isaiah predicted (Is. 60:5). The third situation in life once again relates to the psalmist's life: "This poor man called, and Be-er heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles" (v. 6). In conclusion the psalmist recalls the exile. During the journey through the wilderness the angel of Be-er was present like a protective shield around Israel who fears and who is delivered by Be-er (v. 7). After the description of these four situations in which Be-er's liberating presence was detected, the community is called to see and taste how incredibly good Be-er is in all situations in life.

Taste and see that Be-er is good;  
 Blessed is the person who takes refuge in Him.  
 Fear Be-er, you saints,  
 For those who fear Him lack nothing.  
 The lions may grow weak and hungry,  
 But those who seek Be-er lack no good thing (vv. 8-10).

An exemplary disciple is the one who, in all circumstances, entrusts him- or herself (i.e. in fear, exile, anxiety and oppression) to the Name. They will taste and see in all situations how good, despite everything, "Be there!" is. They will taste and sample with deep awe that the one who sanctifies him through the Holy One, will lack nothing. Like a lioness He looks after those who fear Him. But He is more than a lioness. Cubs suffer hunger, but those who seek Be-er "lack nothing good." The repetition of words in this short stanza is striking: "Be-er" is mentioned three times, "good" twice, "fear" twice, and "lack" twice. Through these repetitions the poet reiterates, "It is *Be-er* and He alone (the Name appears sixteen times in the psalm) who remains *good* in all situations. It is tasted and seen by those who *fear*. They *lack* nothing."

We note here how the learning community is invited to fearfully experience the awesome working of the Name among them ("fear" is mentioned three times in v. 7 and twice in v. 9). Every situation, however anxious, broken or alienated, encompasses the appeal of the Incomprehensible One, "Be there! Live!" Every situation comprises the invitation to accept it in fear: to taste, see, stand

in awe, find shelter, question. These are all verbs that express the receiving aspect of fear: whoever stands in awe before Be-er, extracts from every life situation the kindness of Be-er. Yet he remains awesome through it all. The fearing disciple recognises the awesome working of Be-er in all situations. He is the heart of creation, the essence of good, the source of wisdom, the soul of the home, the fountain of life, the provider of a life partner, the decision in strife, the helper in the justice and the saviour in need.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. ENDURING REALITY AS GOD'S COUNTENANCE<sup>8</sup>

Tasting and seeing the kindness of Be-er in everything, does not mean that his kindness instantly satisfies any needs. As Buber correctly remarks, the reality of life, however awesome and incomprehensible, must be endured for the countenance (Buber 1962:530). Awe implies waiting. Fear means reticence. Respect honours the other in her or his uniqueness, although it sometimes questions the other. Awe is therefore accompanied by waiting.

But the eyes of Be-er are on those who fear Him,  
On those whose hope is in his unfailing love (Ps. 33:18).  
Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,  
Because I have hoped in your word (Ps. 119:74).  
Be-er delights in those who fear Him,  
Who put their love in his unfailing love (Ps. 147:11).

Waiting is trusting without any guarantee (Ps. 130:5-6). The waiting person is completely focussed on a gesture from the other side (Ps. 130:7). Nothing is forced in any way. One waits on grace, on unfailing love (cf. Ps. 33:18 and 147:11). Waiting is longing for what cannot be organised, for the free word of the Other (Ps. 130:5 and 7; 119:74; Cf. Barth1982:603-610).

This fearful waiting is illustrated by the words of the pilgrim in Psalm 131. The pilgrim is probably a woman because she describes her as a mother who carries her child on the arm. "Like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul with me" (v. 2cd). The woman appears before Be-er's countenance. She addresses Him directly.

My heart is not proud, O Be-er,  
My eyes are not haughty;  
I do not concern myself with great matters  
Or things too wonderful for me (v. 1).

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<sup>7</sup> Prov. 14:27; 15:33; 22:4; Eccl. 3:14; etc. Cf. Von Rad (1970:245-51).

<sup>8</sup> For the notion of countenance, cf. the introductory paragraph.

The three repetitions of “not” spell out the space of the covenant (as in Psalm 1; cf. also Ps. 15, 24, 26 and 101). The pilgrim witnesses confidently before Be-er about three things that were not done. She has not acted arrogantly against God and others. She has not looked down haughtily on others. She is not prying and does not concern herself with things that were too wonderful for her. She swears to have done exactly the opposite (v. 2ab). She has humbly focussed on reality. She has brought herself in line with life as it unfolds in and among us. She has quieted her soul. So she is quietly in tune with reality. As a child who has been weaned and who sits on the mother’s arm, so has she weaned her soul from direct satisfaction of needs, in order to continue freely and independently on life’s journey.

This stillness in fear, detached and liberated from the immediate satisfaction of needs, is a “waiting” (v. 3) that is completely focussed on Be-er. It represents a mystical waiting that has no other point of support than only Be-er. The repeated “not” of the first stanza spells out the nature of this awe as not proud, not haughty and not concerned. The quiet waiting trusts solely on the coming of Be-er. This waiting is filled with awe, because it is utterly passive (reticent and fearful), but at the same time also utterly active (tense expectation, hoping). Through this respectful involvement, this quiet waiting becomes an intense perception of Be-er in his incomprehensible presence.

## 5. FEAR OF GOD IS TO LIVE A VIRTUOUS LIFE

As awe unfolds, Be-er’s existence is acknowledged and endured. This awe is not restricted to tasting, seeing or quiet waiting. The mystical awe continues further in virtuous love. A fearing person, as Buber remarked, loves existence in the love of God that he has learnt to love (Buber 1962:530).

This ongoing effect is clear in Psalm 34. In the first part of the Psalm (vv. 4-10) we learn to taste, see, fear and question Be-er, as was explained above. In the second part of the Psalm (vv. 11-22) we are called to act respectfully.

Come, my children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of Be-er.  
Whoever of you loves life  
And desires to see many good days,  
Keep your tongue from evil  
And your lips from speaking lies.  
Turn from evil and do good;  
Seek peace and pursue it (vv. 11-14).

It is striking that awe is characterised through verbs that describe a life of reverence: speak no evil, do not lie, do good and not evil, seek peace. Such a person will “see good.” He or she will see how the golden rule of peace — the

retribution according to what has been done — is applied by Be-er: The righteous will be justified, the wicked will be doomed (vv. 16-22).

A similar transition from awe as open receptivity to awe as respectful action takes place from Psalms 111 to 112. Psalm 111, as was pointed out, concludes with fear that is regarded as the beginning of wisdom; the psalm evokes deep awe for the working of the Name in creation and in the history of Israel. With awe we discover that we live in a dreadfully fascinating reality. This mystical insight with which Psalm 111 ends, forms the source of the respectful way of life with which Psalm 112 begins: “Blessed is the person who fears Be-er” (v. 1). The fearing person will have children who will be blessed (v. 2); his righteousness endures forever (v. 3); he is gracious and compassionate and righteous (v. 4); he guarantees justice (v. 4), is a light for everyone (v. 4), is reliable in his promises (v. 9); he is righteous in conducting his affairs (v. 6); he is inscribed in the collective memory (v. 6), will not be shaken by bad news (v. 7), is generous to the poor (v. 9) and is a threat to the wicked (v. 10). This description of the respectful person who lives and acts in awe, illustrates well that awe is not only a matter of fearful sensitivity, but also a form of respectful living.<sup>9</sup>

And yet this description only touches the surface. Its inner meaning is illuminated through a comparison of Psalms 111 and 112. Both Psalms are alphabetically structured in such a manner that in both psalms every half verse begins with a new letter of the alphabet. But it evokes even more awe that the same words that are used to describe the person who fears are also used to describe Be-er! Both are characterised by justice, both “give”, both “rule”, both are “forever” and “in eternity”, both live on in “memory”, both participate in the order of “justice”. Sometimes the same description is given in the same place in the poem: they are both “gracious and compassionate.” Especially the latter evokes awe, because the two terms that characterise the holy Name (cf. Ex. 34:6) are applied to the righteous one. The fearful one, who has been awakened to stand in awe of the holy Name (Ps. 111) and who expresses this awe in a committed lifestyle (Ps. 112), embodies the presence of the Name in the community.

Even in darkness light dawns for the upright:  
the gracious and compassionate and righteous one (v. 4).

The committed person shines like a soft light: gracious and compassionate. In his presence people and things are exposed to light. They are protected by him or her. The person brings them to the truth of their being. In this he embodies the presence of Be-er. This is the mystical dimension of the respectful life (Ps. 112) that flows forth from fear and awe and that is, in turn, evoked by the working of the holy Name (Ps. 111).

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9 In the history of spirituality the fear of God and a life of virtue are always linked together as a matter of course. Cf. Boularand (1953:2478).

Other Psalms also reveal how life in fear makes Be-er to become transparent. According to Psalm 127, Be-er is the builder of the house that builders build and the watcher of the city where watchers stand guard (v. 1). Be-er gives us the children that we beget (v. 3) and guards over justice in the city with us (v. 4-5).

Psalm 128 describes people who fear Be-er (vv. 1 and 4) as those who enjoy their labour (v. 2), rejoice in the fertility of their wives and delight in being surrounded by their children (v. 3). Someone who tastes reciprocal love, is blessed by God: "Thus is the person blessed who fears Be-er" (v. 4). And these blessings continue into space and time (vv. 5-6).

In Psalm 133 brothers who respect each other — "How good and pleasant! (v. 1) — are compared with oil that lavishly runs down from the head on the beard, down upon the collar of robes and with the dew that falls on Zion (vv. 1-3). This benevolent respect and generous kindness are regarded as Be-er's blessings: "For there Be-er bestows his blessing, life forevermore" (v. 3). All these examples show a person who loves in a fearful manner with the love of God. He or she learnt to love God in the awesome reality that has been given to us. In awe that comes when reality reveals its incomprehensibility once and for all, both the holy working of God and the fearful respect of the faithful are mutually visible. The fearful one is Light (with a capital L): "Even in darkness Light dawns for the upright one: the gracious and compassionate and righteous one!"

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