

The Hebrew Corner

The value of wisdom is emphasized in the Tanach. In fact, Proverbs 8 is devoted to a discussion of the importance of wisdom. It is also true that wisdom is associated with fear in the Tanach. What kind of fear is this that accompanies wisdom? Let's start by looking at Proverbs 9:10:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.”

Fear of the LORD in Hebrew is yirat Adonai (יראת יהוה, yih-RAHT ~). Adonai is substituted here for the covenant name of God, as is customary in Jewish commentaries. This is not to say that we should be in terror of God, any more than a dog is terrified of his owner, but to show awe and respect for God, and to obey him. In this passage, a kind of alliterative style is heard in the phrase t'hillat hokma yirat Adonai (תחלת חכמה יראת יהוה, tuh-chihl-laht chok-MAH yih-RAHT ~), in which the tav (ת) is repeated at the end of the first and third words, perhaps to emphasize by sound the equivalence of the two ideas represented: beginning of wisdom, (hokma (חכמה) being the Hebrew word for wisdom), and fear of the LORD. T'hilla can be translated as either beginning or first principle.

In Psalms 111:10, the KJV translation starts out the same:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth forever.”

A different Hebrew word translated as beginning is used here, raysheet (רשית, ray-SHEET), also used in Genesis 1:1 as b'raysheet, or, in the beginning. The full Hebrew phrase is raysheet hokma yirat Adonai (רשית חכמה יראת יהוה, ray-SHEET chok-MAH yih-RAHT ~), so again we see the pattern of repeating the tav at the end of the first and third words in the phrase. The use of raysheet identifies this with a beginning in time. So from the two passages, we get that the fear of the LORD is the first principle of wisdom, and it is the start of the journey to finding wisdom. Job puts this concept simply (Job 28:28):

“And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”

Now from 1 John 4 we know that one of the attributes of God is his love (1 John 4:8):

“He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.”

Jesus warns of another attribute of God, that his righteous nature requires that he judge wickedness severely (Luke 12:4-5):

“And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.”

Thus the wise individual will do well to be fully aware of both of these attributes of God. God has made a way for us to have a loving

relationship with him through Jesus, our Yeshua, but those who reject his plan of salvation will not see the loving nature, but only God, the righteous judge. This is why the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the acceptance of Yeshua as our savior is the beginning of life. May you all experience the abundant life that God has in store for you through Jesus, and receive all the blessings he has in store for you.