

# Fear of the Lord

by H.A. Nielsen

**R**ECENT POPES, inviting Catholic scholars use modern historical techniques in biblical studies, have also cautioned them to make sure their conclusions are based on the *whole* of Scripture. Few, even among professional scholars, have time to keep the whole Bible in focus. Most of us have to get our milk and honey one drop at a time out of the Promised Land. But you don't have to ingest the whole or even a whole book in order to make contact with its spirit; so there's no need to apologize for reading only a fragment at one sitting. You might read the first chapter of Job to refresh your memory of the setting, and then (because the children will soon be home from school or the garden needs weeding) jump ahead to chapter 28 to get a feeling for the later sections. You will be in contact with the mentality behind the Book of Job when you are so caught up *in* it that questions *about* it—Was Job an actual historical person? Where exactly on the map was the Land of Uz?—look like detours. One who reads for nourishment knows that he is as vulnerable as Job to crushing losses and angry sores, and this knowledge is his passport to the land of Uz.

Job 28 reviews man's gift for sniffing out precious or useful things: metals deep in the earth where torches light the mines, gemstones in the beds of dammed-up creeks. Then, in 28.12, comes the question, "But where shall wisdom be found?" Job's assertion is that wisdom is just as much *hidden* from mankind as from birds that can spot their prey from a mile up. How should we live? Whom should we model our lives after? What should we put first?—the answers to these are hidden; we need a revelation to put us on the road to wisdom. There is a revelation, or a piece of one, relayed by Job at the end: wisdom has to include, "the fear of the Lord" (28.28). This fear of the Lord is a special kind of fear, having nothing to do with the types of distractedness we call "fright." I couldn't be wise about ordinary things in the middle of scare, if I thought, for example, that an animal was about to bite me.

Expressions can be wonderfully undefined or under-defined, suggesting that their function is not so much to deliver information as to put us on the *qui vive*. The Book of Job makes it a fairly urgent matter to figure out what "fear of the Lord" means, and it is easy enough to construct an expression roughly equivalent to "fear of the Lord." A phrase such as "acknowledging God's majesty" would serve. The trouble with defining this specific sense of "fear" is that we have

countless ways of acknowledging God's majesty, too many to pack into a definition. We can address him with Jewish titles such as "Ruler of the Universe" or, as in the old prayer before Mass, "the complete dependence of everything upon thee" (words with an extra significance today, when many talk as though everything depended on a few individuals who control nuclear missiles). We also salute the highest majesty when we greet the glories of May and June, as when we admire leafy, flowery, buggy, furry, feathery, and human creations that take our breath away with their beauty. And we acknowledge majesty by doing the small tasks of answering the phone and weeding the garden, consciously leaving it to God to hold the solar system together so that we can grow alyssum and tomatoes next summer.

Addressing God as King, greeting the glories of spring and summer, weeding the garden—these may not sound much like expressing *fear* of the Lord. They don't add up to fear in the ordinary sense. Then why does Job use that word? Could it be because the word expresses our dependence? The mentality behind the Book of Job is tremendously supple and athletic, bending and stretching the concept of fear to bring it up close to other concepts: awe, trust, reverence, gratitude, love. 