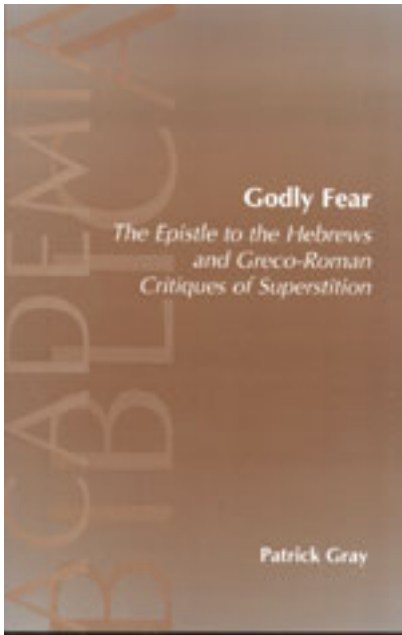


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Gray, Patrick

Godly Fear: The Epistle to the Hebrews and Greco-Roman Critiques of Superstition

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Patrick Gray addresses the extent to which the Christianity found in Hebrews qualifies as superstition. He proposes that the author of Hebrews articulates a Christian faith that may be understood in the context of debates about appropriate and inappropriate fear comparable to Plutarch's thoughts on superstition (*deisidaimonia*). The author of Hebrews communicates a Christian self-understanding that neutralizes the potential charge of being superstitious (6–9).

Gray states three specific reasons why Plutarch can be used to understand Hebrews and the symbolic world in which it participates. First, Hebrews and Plutarch are contemporaries; Plutarch's date ranges from 70 C.E. into the second century, and Hebrews was most likely written between 52 and 95 C.E. This means that Hebrews overlaps with Plutarch's most prolific period. Second, Plutarch was from the Greek mainland but spent considerable time in Rome and Italy, and Hebrews was written either to or from Italy ("those from Italy" [Heb 13:24]); thus Plutarch and the author of Hebrews shared the same geographical milieu. Third, Plutarch and Hebrews were both influenced by Platonic tradition.

The introduction addresses the question under investigation ("superstition" or "godly fear"?), gives a self-definition of how the early church perceived itself (Christianity as

superstition), describes the common milieu between Plutarch and the Epistle to the Hebrews, relates the Epistle to the Hebrews to the history of religions school within its Hellenistic context, and communicates the methodology employed. In chapter 2 Gray examines the Greek vocabulary employed by Plutarch to describe superstition, particularly the cognates of *deisidaimonia* that reveal how fear is the most pervasive characteristic. Plutarch regards the gods as benevolent, reiterating that there is never any cause for fear in one's relations with them. Thus, "fear of the gods is a negative thing." The concept of fear is similar to various other philosophers (Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans). Fear is considered an unpleasant feeling that signals some deficiency in the virtue of courage. This is the major symptom of superstition.

Chapter 3 examines passages in Hebrews that address the subject of fear. In Hebrews fear is itself an undesirable state and usually serves as an indicator of peril or disordered priorities. However, against the thinking of the philosophers and Plutarch examined in the previous chapter, fearlessness is achievable only because of what has transpired with Christ, not because of the belief that it is associated with superstition. Chapter 4 concentrates on Heb 5:7 and 12:18–29, where Hebrews portrays fear in a positive light and consequently makes the author and his readers susceptible to a charge of superstition. Hebrews 5:7, where the author speaks of the "godly fear" (*eulabeia*) of the human Jesus, emphasizes Jesus' reverent subordination of his will to God's. This prompts him to acquiesce to his own death. Hebrews 12:18–29 teaches how "reverent awe" is a fitting response of thanksgiving and worship offered to God under the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus' sacrifice. In the last chapter Gray draws together the key insights of the preceding chapters. The fear of God for both Hebrews and the critics of superstition such as Plutarch is not anxiety directed at an unpredictable deity; fear is associated with wrongdoing and the threat of punishment by deity. Hebrews is similar to the understanding of superstition of the Greek philosophers in that the fear of God is associated with death and divine judgment. However, Hebrews makes the claim that there is *parresia* because of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus that provides an effective solution to human sin that is the root of the gravest fears. Hebrews leaves intact the basic premise that fear of God alone is legitimate. It is this idea that leaves Christianity susceptible to the charge of *deisidaimonia* for observers after Plutarch.

Gray's study provides us with a wealth of information on the subject of superstition in the Greco-Roman world. He engages in analytical studies on Aristotle and the Hellenistic schools and summarizes their core components. He concludes that fear is an unpleasant feeling that usually signals some deficiency in the cardinal virtue of courage. Plutarch takes this philosophical estimation of fear and, with modifications, applies it to popular religious beliefs and observances in his essay on superstition.

Gray's study attempts to situate early Christianity in its Mediterranean milieu. He examines how the Christian faith and its understanding of fear in Hebrews would be received in the context of ancient debates about superstition. At various points in this investigation Plutarch is brought into the discussion with Hebrews (e.g., 186, 225–27). This is intended to highlight both the differences and similarities between their respective understandings of fear. The reader finds this both engaging and thought provoking. However, Gray takes this too far when he states, "The author [of Hebrews] has an apologetic interest in addressing the perception that Christianity is a superstition" (6, cf. 216). Most agree that the major purpose of Hebrews was to warn against apostasy and exhort the readers to faithfulness (Heb 2:1–3; 3:6, 12–14; 4:1, 11–13). The concept of "fear" must be related to this concern in the letter. If the author of Hebrews was attempting to guard against portraying Christianity as a superstition, why does he place the words, "I tremble with *fear*" on Moses' lips and his experience on Sinai (Heb 12:21), when it is not found in the Old Testament? This would make Christianity more susceptible to the charge of superstition according to the standards employed by Plutarch. The inclusion of *fear* here in Heb 12:21 indicates that the author had other priorities in mind. The author wants to keep Christian believers from the temptation to return to their former life of Judaism. Those who have been to Mount Zion (the heavenly Jerusalem, Jesus, and new covenant) can never contemplate a return to Moses and Mount Sinai. The author's concern here is not with the idea that the Christian faith may qualify as a superstition.

In his explanation of Heb 5:7 Gray claims that the use of *eulabeia* instead of *phobos* was the author's manner of using fear in a positive way in Jesus' prayer and consequently neutralizing the charge of *deisidaimonia* (188). But could it not be that the author intended to put a positive spin on the tradition associated with the Gethsemane scene, where Jesus is portrayed as having an emotional break-down (Mark 14:32–36 ["I am deeply grieved, even unto death" [14:34]; "he [Jesus] threw himself on the ground" [14:35])? There are significant alterations to this scene by Luke, which, contrary to Mark, portrays Jesus as confident and submitting to God's will for his life (Luke 22:39–46; Luke leaves out any indication of Jesus' *fear* of death and the idea that Jesus loses his composure under pressure, cf. 22:41, where Jesus kneels down [an indication of submission to God's will] and prays). The use of *eulabeia* meaning "a measured quality of fear and reverent subordination to God's will" in Heb 5:7 coincides precisely with Luke's version of "not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Therefore, the author's use of *eulabeia* instead of *phobos* in Heb 5:7 does not *specifically* prove that he was attempting to guard against the perception that Jesus experienced a fear indicative of superstitious belief. Rather, his thought is parallel to the contemporary tendency to remove any objectionable action of Jesus in the Gethsemane tradition. Here in the Epistle

to the Hebrews any hint of weakness shown by Jesus in these decisive moments before his death would run contrary to proving how Jesus' obedience unto death was the source of eternal life that led him to his current role as high priest before God.

In sum, Gray's work makes a significant contribution to the understanding of superstition and fear in the Greco-Roman world and, in particular, how fear in Hebrews would have been perceived as superstition as seen through the eyes of Plutarch. However, this book must be read with caution. The proposition that the author of Hebrews intended to neutralize the charge that Christianity was a superstition has not been successfully proven.