

# From Disturbing Dreams to Divine Dread: Fear in Late Antique Christian Magic from Egypt

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Abstract: In this essay, I examine the use of fear-language in the Greek and Coptic Christian magical objects from late antiquity. I divide my analysis of this language into two parts, which more or less correspond to the two primary (though partially overlapping) ways fear manifests itself in such textual objects: (1) as an emotion experienced by clients as a result of dangers posed by physical, preternatural, and magical threats and (2) as an emotion that God or a divinely inspired ritual object was believed to have caused in (demonic) enemies. As part of my analysis, I also note cases in which these respective perspectives on fear engage with one another.

## 1. Introduction

The complex set of emotions that we call “fear” constitutes a condition that meanders within and across the boundaries between the universal, the psychologically specific, and the socially contingent. The dangers and fears associated with the so-called night witch motif are so commonly and consistently presented across cultures that some scholars have claimed that this specific type of personification of evil represents a “psychic constant.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, it is also true that no two people of any given culture will react exactly the same way to threats and other menacing internal or external stimuli. As recent neurological analysis has highlighted, much of this individual variation in fear is the result of so-called “negative emotionality” (i.e., “the general tendency to show various forms of negative affect including [exaggerated] anxiety, guilt, moodiness, angeriness, insecurity and dissatisfaction”).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, fear (or the lack thereof) can be dictated by particular social and historical factors; general conventions of fear, dread, fright, panic, and synonymous concepts can thus both be shared in a given context and change in a large-scale way over time and across space. The widespread and sensationalized – though unsubstantiated – social panic over satanic ritual abuse in America during the late 1980s and early 1990s would hardly scare most people around the world today, including most present-day Americans, who tend to approach slanderous claims of

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion and references, see FRANKFURTER 2006: 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> SJOUWERMAN / SCHARFENORT / LONSDORF 2020.

deviancy and abuse based on religious affiliation with a more critical eye than their forebearers.<sup>3</sup> But such social, psychological, and interpersonal dimensions can also intersect at times; a recent experiment conducted on web-video reactions to the film *In-sidious* (2010) has demonstrated how individual responses to the film (e.g., being startled) were dramatically impacted and shaped by interpersonal dynamics at play in the room.<sup>4</sup>

Given the psychological, historical, and social dimensions endemic to the concept of “fear,” the task of tracing fear in the ancient world is marked by a series of theoretical and methodological challenges that are related to our distance from the primary sources in time, region, and language – not to mention the difficulties intrinsic to interpreting fear language across diverse genres. Such analytical obstacles notwithstanding, the extant evidence does allow us to make some approximations on the things ancient and late ancient peoples “feared” and how they reacted to those fears.

In this essay, I will address the theme of fear in the late antique Egyptian artifacts scholars generally deem both Christian and magical, with particular attention to textual objects with inscriptions in Greek and Coptic.<sup>5</sup> Although we might intuit behind many of the amulets written against fevers, demons, or witchcraft and other pathological / demonic / ritual concerns a certain level of what we might call fear, the ancient language that we associate with and thus translate with terms, such as “fear,” only explicitly manifests itself in such textual objects on occasion. This language was principally deployed in late antique Egyptian magical contexts in two partially overlapping ways: (1) as a condition of the client in light of a particular threat or danger and (2) as a condition that God induces in (demonic) enemies, especially in those that cause harm to the client. For heuristic purposes, I divide my brief essay into two parts which reflect these respective tendencies in the evidence. That said, I note objects in which both dimensions interact and overlap.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Human Fear in Late Antique Christian Magic

Fear represents an emotion purportedly experienced by late antique Egyptian clients in dialogue with a range of threats, contexts, and entities. In many cases, fear is presented in generic terms. Thus, the so-called *Prayer and Exorcism of Gregory* (Leiden, ms. AMS 9, 6r ll. 11–12), describes how the “prayer” ([προς-]εὔχη) and “amulet” (φυλακτήριον)

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<sup>3</sup> On the social dimensions of claims of satanic ritual abuse in America and abroad during the late 1980s and early 1990s, see LEWIS 2016; FRANKFURTER 2006: 1–8.

<sup>4</sup> See RENDA 2019.

<sup>5</sup> For useful checklists of such objects, see DE BRUYN / DIJKSTRA 2011 (Greek) and BÉLANGER-SARRAZIN 2017 (Coptic).

<sup>6</sup> My essay will attend to the ancient Greek and Coptic terms in these texts translated as “fear” (and related nomenclature). In this way, my analysis follows in the scholarly line of Gregory Nagy, who has demonstrated how any discussion of fear in the ancient world must take seriously the principal ancient terminology typically translated as “fear” in our modern editions. See NAGY 2010 (now available online at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/curated-article/gregory-nagy-the-subjectivity-of-fear-as-reflected-in-ancient-greek-wording/>).

proscribed – through the power of God – heals “all our fears” (νενηστε τηρου).<sup>7</sup> The Coptic term *γοτε* – much like the English term “fear” – denoted reverence toward God or referred to more negative associations with a reaction to harm or danger.<sup>8</sup> The latter sense is certainly at play in our text since the ritual specialist has highlighted a range of threats, especially from rival practitioners.<sup>9</sup> We can thus presume that many of the fears envisioned in this generic statement were thought to have been the result of the harmful rituals of social adversaries.<sup>10</sup>

Other late antique objects explicitly draw attention to specific fears. Several texts emphasize fears associated with night and sleep. For instance, P. Mich. 593, a fourth-to-sixth-century CE collection of spells written in Coptic and sometimes deemed “A Coptic Wizard’s Hoard,” includes a spell “for one who fears the night” (ετβε πετρηστε κωρη [read: κωρη]).<sup>11</sup> Although Egyptian Christian monks often associated night with solitude and prayer,<sup>12</sup> ancient and late ancient Egyptians drew a connection between night and a range of physical and preternatural dangers and threats, including evil spirits and ghosts, who might bring nightmares (see below) or sicknesses.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that the fear operative in this spell was thought to be associated with sleep disorders since the very next spell in this collection is written “for one who does not (regularly) sleep” (ετβε ογα εμαρωβω).<sup>14</sup> The relationship between the fear caused by evil spirits and sleeping problems is implied in Vienna G 337, Rainer 1 (= PGM II, P10), a lacunose fourth-century CE Greek papyrus amulet, which includes the following adjuration: “And now I adjure all of you spirits who weep, or laugh frightfully, [or] make a person have bad dreams or terror, or make eyesight dim, or teach confusion or guile of mind in sleep and out of sleep.”<sup>15</sup> This text not only gestures toward the idea that evil spirits laugh in

<sup>7</sup> *Editio princeps*: PLEYTE and BOESER 1897: 441–79 (= MEYER / SMITH 1999: no. 134). Leiden, ms. AMS 9, dates between the sixth and eighth centuries CE (e.g., PETRUCCI 1995; SZIRMAI 1999: 43 n. 6; SANZO 2014: 82 no. 5 [=P. Anastasi 9]). Although the text of *The Prayer and Exorcism of Gregory* is written in Coptic, there are later exemplars in Greek (see VAN DER VLIET 2019: 329). On the relationship between prayer and amuletic language in this Coptic codex – with particular attention to the practitioner’s approach to materiality – see SANZO 2020: 110–13.

<sup>8</sup> The “fear / reverence” (*γοτε*) of God was a common trope in early Christian literature (e.g., *Apothegmata Patrum Sahidic* 124: Orsisius 1). The noun *γοτε* – or the verb *ρηγοτε* – was used to translate several different Greek expressions, including the verbs φοβέω and δειδω (see discussions below). For a helpful overview of such uses, see CRUM 2005 (1939): 721.

<sup>9</sup> In an earlier section of this text (Leiden, ms. AMS 9, 1r, ll. 7–14), we read that his amulet (φυλακτηριον) will “destroy every action that is instigated by evil people, whether sorcery, or incantations, or binding of people by various diseases.”

<sup>10</sup> On the social and interpersonal contexts of harmful ritual objects, see e.g., GORDON 2015; FRANK-FURTER 2018: 205–206.

<sup>11</sup> *Editio princeps*: WORRELL 1930. See also MIRECKI 1994.

<sup>12</sup> See HELMS 2004: 180–81.

<sup>13</sup> On the relationship between such threats and night in ancient Egypt, see RITNER 1990; FISCHER-ELFERT / HOFFMANN 2020: 209–215.

<sup>14</sup> As Paul Mirecki has underscored, the structure of this portion of P. Mich. 593 seems to be thematically associated with “psychological and behavioral problems related to the evening hours” (MIRECKI 1994: 454). The exact relationship between these two spells, however, is unclear.

<sup>15</sup> Trans. MEYER / SMITH 1999: 45 (no. 20). All translations of this object come from MEYER / SMITH 1999 unless otherwise stated.

a horrifying way (γελῶντα φοβερὰ [see below]),<sup>16</sup> but it also fits within the longstanding and widespread tradition in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East that linked harmful spirits to nightmares.<sup>17</sup> In the so-called “execration texts” from Middle Egypt, for instance, we find the idea that malevolent, incorporeal forces could inspire, *inter alia*, “all bad dreams in all bad sleep.”<sup>18</sup>

But other types of fear could be operative. A Coptic curse against a certain woman named Alō that dates to around the sixth century CE might include a prescription to instill fear of death in the victim’s house (P. Mich. 3565).<sup>19</sup> In addition to curses drawn from biblical traditions, such as the “curses of the Law” and probably also “Deuteronomy,”<sup>20</sup> we find the following words: “May (the) curse (of) God descend upon Alō and her entire house(hold). May the consternation / fear / disturbance (πεωροπρη) of death be in Alō’s house. May you make them bedridden.” The meaning of the Coptic noun *ωροπρη*, which carries the basic sense of “disturbance, trouble, haste,” is unclear in this passage.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, we might understand the practitioner as merely calling for an expedient death in Alō’s household – perhaps with disturbing emotions other than fear proper (e.g., sadness or dismay) associated with this death.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the very next phrase calls for the entire household to experience a physical calamity (i.e., to become bedridden) without any “fear” qualifier might lend credence to this interpretation

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<sup>16</sup> It is possible that the connection the practitioner behind Vienna G 337, Rainer 1 (= PGM II, P10) makes between laughter (γελῶντα) and evil spirits is related to the ancient Greek ghost Gello, who was associated with harm to children and to virgins. As Sarah Iles Johnston has noted, “Gello thwarts reproduction at both ends of the process...preventing marriage and pregnancy before they occur and killing their product, the child, if they do occur” (JOHNSTON 1999: 166).

<sup>17</sup> E.g., HUSSER / MOUTON 2010; BELLUSCI 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Trans. SZPAKOWSKA 2010: 25. Robert Ritner understood these texts as operating within a protective context against “magical assault” (RITNER 1993: 140). As Kasia Szpakowska has emphasized, Ritner’s thesis would imply that through such magical actions – and with the assistance of the accompanying malevolent spiritual forces – “a living individual could actually cause others to see bad dreams” (SZPAKOWSKA 2010: 25). As part of this broader conceptual tradition, evil spirits were also believed to be able to inflict harm on the sleeper through their glances (SZPAKOWSKA 2010: 31). On the persistence of traditional Egyptian execration rituals into Coptic and Arabic contexts through the early modern period of Egypt and beyond (though recast in light of Christianity and Islam respectively), see HANSEN 2002. As Hansen notes about such continuities, “...it becomes obvious that the practice [of execration] has changed little in 5000 years, with regards to the substances used to make the figurines, the tortures to which they are subjected, and the places in which they are deposited” (HANSEN 2002: 433).

<sup>19</sup> *Editio princeps*: WORRELL 1935: 13–16 (= MEYER / SMITH 1999: no. 104).

<sup>20</sup> William H. Worrell reconstructed the text here as reading τετρανομος, which he tentatively understood as the Greek “δευτερονομος” (WORRELL 1935: 15). If Worrell’s reconstruction is correct, the use of the Law and Deuteronomy would have allowed the client – and presumably God himself – to imagine and apply via metonymy a wide range of curses from the Hebrew Bible against Alō. On the role of such metonymic transfers in late antique Egyptian magical contexts, see SANZO 2014: 150–77. For a discussion of the trope of the curses of the Law and Deuteronomy as it relates to identifying “Jewish” vs. “non-Jewish” inscriptions from Asia Minor, see BIJ DE VAATE / VAN HENTEN 1996, 20–21.

<sup>21</sup> CRUM 2005 (1939): 598.

<sup>22</sup> This is the interpretation that seems to stand behind Worrell’s translation of *ωροπρη* as “consternation” (WORRELL 1935: 16).

of ⲩⲣⲟⲣⲧⲣ. At the same time, there is evidence supporting Stephen H. Skiles’s translation of ⲩⲣⲟⲣⲧⲣ in this passage as “fear.”<sup>23</sup> The noun ⲩⲣⲟⲣⲧⲣ could at times be closely associated with the more common Coptic term for fear, ϣⲟⲣⲉ (see discussion above). For instance, in *Pistis Sophia* 1.2, we read: “and they hymned all together unto the inward part of the inward parts, becoming *in great fear with great disturbance* (ϣⲛⲟϥⲛⲟⲥ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲉ ⲛⲛⲟϥⲛⲟⲥ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲣⲧⲣ).” To the extent that Skiles’s translation is accurate, the aforementioned curse would imply that fear of death (ⲛⲟϥ) would have been considered dreadful enough that people included it within their harmful arsenal against enemies. Fear would thus emerge from this imprecatory text as one among many problems, including hunger, misery, eye problems, and immobility, that the client wishes to impose on poor Alō. In either case, this example attests to the difficulties inherent in trying to identify emotions, such as fear, in our (late) ancient texts.

### 3. God as the Source of Fear in Late Antique Christian Magic

Fear was not always presented in this magical corpus as something impacting clients. In fact, one of the ways in which late antique Egyptian practitioners seemed to have assuaged the fears of their (potential) clients was to assure them that God instilled fear in their (demonic) adversaries. Thus, P. Oxy. VIII 1151 (= PGM II, P5b), a fifth-century CE Greek amulet written on behalf of “Iōannia, whom Anastasia (a.k.a. Euphemia) bore” to combat her demonically inspired fever with accompanying chills<sup>24</sup> concludes with the following adaptation of a Christian liturgical formula: “Because your name, oh Lord God, I have invoked, (the name that is) marvelous, both exceedingly glorious and frightful to (your) enemies.”<sup>25</sup> Alongside its liturgical echoes, the notion that God’s name could frighten demons was well embedded into the late antique Egyptian magical tradition.<sup>26</sup> The root behind the Greek term φοβερός (translated above as “frightful”) carries the basic sense of causing one to run away.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the practitioner behind P. Oxy. VIII 1151 (= PGM II, P5b) has appropriated this liturgical formula would suggest that in his mind the name of God was so powerful that it caused God’s (demonic) enemies to flee in fear.

A more complex approach to the ways in which demons could experience fear is found in Vienna G 337, Rainer 1 (= PGM II, P10; see discussion above). We have already seen how the practitioner behind this spell used fear language to describe how demons laugh and cause nightmares. The first portion of the text, however, frames fear as an emotion God causes in his human and demonic enemies:

<sup>23</sup> In MEYER / SMITH 1999: 212 (no. 104).

<sup>24</sup> On account of these symptoms, AnneMarie Luijendijk has reasonably hypothesized that Iōannia suffered from malaria (LUIJENDIJK 2014: 421).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Metaphrasis martyria sanctae Tatianae* 6 (HALKIN 1973: 56–81, at 61; cf. DE BRUYN 2017: 109 n. 121): “for blessed is the name of your glory – (the name that is) great, glorious, and frightful to (your) enemies.”

<sup>26</sup> E.g., PGM VII.324ff; Suppl. Mag. Nos. 48 and 49.

<sup>27</sup> NAGY 2010: 30–31.

[I adjure you by the four] gospels of the son... , whether a tertian fever or a quartan fever or... fevers... Depart from [N., who wears] this [divine] protector, because the one who [commands you is the] god of Israel, whom [the angels] bless and people [fear and every] spirit dreads (ἄνθρωποι δ[ε]δίασι καὶ πᾶν πνεῦμα φόβηται). Again...demon, whose name..., who has feet of a [wolf but] the [head of] a frog... (ll. 1–14)

This short passage contains several interesting details.<sup>28</sup> For instance, this object highlights how demons could be imagined as physically hybrid (“who has feet of a wolf but the head of a frog”). Hybridity was a monstrous trait that many ancients attributed to such evil spirits.<sup>29</sup> The particular feature of the feet of a wolf and the head of a frog probably relates to the perceived nature of wolves and frogs in the ancient world more generally. While wolves evoked images of a “greedy hunter, bloodthirsty and sexually deviant,” frogs might call to mind evil spirits – at least to those Christians familiar with the Book of Revelation (Rev. 16:13).<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the practitioner does not explicitly associate these hybrid qualities with fear language (though the lacuna in the manuscript prevents us from speaking definitively on this matter).

By contrast, although caution is again in order on account of the lacuna in the manuscript, the present reconstruction – based on the edition of Karl Preisendanz – would imply that God causes two kinds of fear in his enemies that are related to two different verbs: δειδῶ for humans – presumably wicked humans – and φοβίσσω / φοβίττω for (evil) spirits. As Gregory Nagy has highlighted, the verb δειδῶ (or δειδῶ) connotes feeling two ways about something or being in doubt: “it is a primal feeling...as when a deer is caught in the headlights of a speeding car...It can go either way for the deer, *fight or flight*.”<sup>31</sup> The fear or panic that God causes in disobedient people as envisioned in this portion of Vienna G 337, Rainer 1 (= PGM II, P10) thus results in uncertainty or even in a kind of confused paralysis. The verb φοβίττω carries general connotations of being uneven or unsmooth; however, the use of this verb in Vienna G 337, Rainer 1 (= PGM II, P10) seems to conjure up notions of hair standing up on its ends, shuddering, or trembling and, consequently, something like a sense of dread.<sup>32</sup> Although the practitioner distinguishes between these two types of fear, it is clear that both reflect how God deals with his enemies – whether those enemies come from this world or are otherworldly. Much like we have already seen in the artifacts mentioned above, the fearful power of God in Vienna G 337, Rainer 1 (= PGM II, P10) seems to abate the fear of the prospective client, as it forms the basis of his protection from the harmful actions of the monstrous, hybrid demon. Fear thus emerges from this initial portion of the text as something especially applicable to evil spirits who pick a fight with the wrong client (and his god).

<sup>28</sup> As in many late antique magical texts, the pathological and demonic dimensions are closely intertwined. As Christoph Marksches notes about this amulet, “...the relationship between the fever and the demon is perceived to be so close that the actual order in which they were invoked did not particularly matter” (MARKSCHIES 2019: 21).

<sup>29</sup> E.g., BOHAK 2018. The images of demons on Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls, for instance, often present these evil spirits in hybrid form (VILOZNY 2013: 30). Of course, hybridity was not a quality limited to the demonic. For a useful overview of hybrid beings (conventionally called *grylloī*) that appear on ancient gems, see LAPATIN 2012.

<sup>30</sup> MARKSCHIES 2019: 19.

<sup>31</sup> NAGY 2010: 30 (emphasis in original).

<sup>32</sup> On the semantic range of φοβίττω, see LIDDELL / SCOTT 1968: 1955.

But the practitioner also provides an additional layer of complexity to the notion of demonic fright: he seems to have believed that *ritual objects themselves* could cause fear in demons. He thus commands the harmful spirits to depart from “the one who [wears] the fearful [and holy] statements of [oath]” (το[ῦ φοροῦντος] τοὺς φοβεροὺς κα[ὶ ἀγίους ὄρκ]ους).<sup>33</sup> In this case, the artifact itself – presumably in light of its connection to God – has the power to cause demonic adversaries to flee in fear (on the adjective φοβερός, see discussion above). This artifact thus cuts across and complicates the two general approaches to fear that I have distinguished in this essay for heuristic purposes.

The belief that God instills fear into spirits, in general, and into harmful spirits, in particular, was not lost on late antique Egyptian practitioners writing in Coptic. Some practitioners understood this fear of God as reflecting his general power or might. For instance, an early seventh-century CE Coptic spell that is part of a “portfolio” of spells, Brit. Lib. Or. 6796 (2), (3), (1), reads: “every spirit of heaven and earth trembles before [him]. They fear [his holy name, which] is Iaō Sabaōth, Adōnaei, Elōei” (εϣτωϣ ϣ[ατεϣ]ϣη ν̄οῖ π̄νᾱ ν̄η̄ νατπε ν̄η̄ νατκαϣ εϣϣ̄οϣε ϣαϣωϣ ν̄η̄[εϣραη] εϣ̄οϣ[ααβ ετε] πᾱ [η̄ε] ιαω: ϣαβαωθ ααφναει ελω[ει]).<sup>34</sup> In this passage, spirits – presumably including especially harmful spirits – tremble (εϣτωϣ) in God’s presence and fear (εϣ̄οϣε) his name. A similar sentiment is shared by the practitioner behind P. Mich. 593 (see above), who not only discusses fear of the night, but also describes God as “the one before whose name (evil spirits) tremble and fear!” (πετεϣτωϣ αϣω εϣϣ̄οϣε ϣητ̄ϣ̄ η̄ηεϣραη). Leiden, ms. AMS 9 (see above) likewise invokes the “great fearful name (ἡπινοσ ἡραη ετϣαϣοτε) of the father of our Lord Jesus Christ” against a range of demonic and ritual threats (e.g., convulsions and deafness) – collectively referred to as “violent deeds” (ν̄χινσοηϣ) – in order to protect the prospective client.

#### 4. Conclusions

This brief essay has highlighted the two primary ways “fear” was connected to Christian magical contexts in late antique Egypt. First, we saw how fear could appear as a human emotion. Although some objects could present this fear in generic terms, other objects articulated more specific concerns (e.g., fear of the dark, demons and, perhaps, death) that plagued late antique Egyptians. Several of these fears were predicated on longstanding beliefs in Egypt, which could be reconfigured in light of new Christian language and concepts.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, some might consider it useful to classify such fears as “Egyptian” rather than as specifically “Christian.”<sup>36</sup>

Although one might intuitively think that the monstrous, hybrid characteristics of certain evil spirits (e.g., the wolf-footed, frog-headed demon in Vienna G 337, Rainer 1)

<sup>33</sup> Preisendanz’s reconstruction of this lacunose phrase is supported by the appearance of a similar phrase in Vienna G 337, Rainer 1, l. 24: τὸν φοροῦντα τοὺς ὄρκισμοὺς τούτους.

<sup>34</sup> *Editio princeps*: KROPP 1931: nos. G–H (= MEYER / SMITH 1999: no. 131).

<sup>35</sup> On this general trend in the evidence, see FRANKFURTER 2018.

<sup>36</sup> See HANSEN 2002: 445.

would have induced fear in clients, practitioners tended not to explicitly frame the matter in this way. Instead, there was a general tendency to identify fear language with what demons *did*, not necessarily with how they *looked*.

But fear could also be attributed to the character and works of God. This second perspective on fear was shared among practitioners and writers from diverse contexts in the ancient world. As part of this broader tradition, late antique Christians – including several practitioners – believed that the very evil spirits who might harm them could ultimately experience fright at the hands of their God.

These respective portraits of fear in the magical evidence no doubt worked in dialogue with the principal terminology available to late antique Egyptians. Some of the Greek and Coptic words for fear in the extant magical record (e.g., φοβερός and φορε) could denote either dread and the like, on the one hand, or reverence toward God, on the other hand. The latter sense, which was predicated on the great power or omnipotence of God, presumably was also operative in those cases in which the demons or evil humans were thought to have feared God. Yet practitioners, such as the one behind Vienna G 337, Rainer 1 (= PGM II, P10), could at times separate the emotions experienced by humans and demons along linguistic lines: the human experience of God’s wrath (cf. verb δειδω) that results in panicked confusion, on the one hand, could be considered distinct from the shuddering fear (cf. the verb φορίσσω / φορίττω) that God causes in demons, on the other hand.

In the end, the evidence spanning from antiquity to our present day confronts us with an ironic situation: although fear tends to creep up on us when we are all alone, this haunting emotion ultimately derives its power from beliefs and ideas residing at the crossroads of the universally human, the social, and the interpersonal.

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