

For the  
Glory OF God

RECOVERING A  
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY *of* WORSHIP

DANIEL I. BLOCK

  
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To David and Elma Lepp,  
my beloved father- and mother-in-law,  
whose daily lives and service in the church  
have brought great glory to God and inspiration to his people

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# Preface

A number of years ago I preached in a large church with three Sunday morning services. I shall never forget when, at a transitional moment in the service, the “pastor of music and worship” declared to the congregation, “Now, before we continue our worship, let me read a passage from Colossians 3”—as if reading and hearing the Scriptures are not exercises in worship.

This restricted notion of worship is common in our day and is reflected in the ubiquitous labeling of CDs as “praise and worship” music, the specification in church bulletins of the singing period as “worship time,” and the identification of musicians on the pastoral staff as “worship ministers” or “ministers of worship arts.” In fact, the worship industry tends to equate worship not only with music but also with a particular type of music: contemporary praise.

These practices raise all sorts of questions, not only about the significance of other aspects of the Sunday service (prayer, preaching, testimonials, etc.) but also about religious rituals in the Bible and the Scriptures’ relatively minor emphasis on music in worship. Not only is music rarely associated with worship in the New Testament<sup>1</sup> but the Pentateuch is altogether silent on music associated with tabernacle worship. All of this highlights our skewed preoccupation with music in the current conflicts over worship.

But the worship issues faced by the evangelical church at the beginning of the twenty-first century are much deeper than differences in musical taste,

1. References to music in the context of corporate worship occur only in Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12; and Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3. In the ESV (NT), the word “music” occurs only once (Luke 15:25); “song/songs” five times (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3); “melody” once (Eph. 5:19); the verb “sing/sang/singing” thirteen times (Matt. 11:17; Luke 7:32; Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9, a quotation of an OT text; 1 Cor. 14:15 [2×]; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12; James 5:13; Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3). However, the passages in the Gospels do not involve liturgical worship, and Acts 16:25; 1 Cor. 14:15; and James 5:13 involve informal personal worship.

which turns out to be only a symptom of a much more serious problem. In a recent book on worship, Edith Humphrey correctly identifies five maladies that plague worship in the North American church: (1) trivializing worship by a preoccupation with atmospherics/mood (it's all about how worship makes me feel); (2) misdirecting worship by having a human-centered rather than God-centered focus (it's all about me, the worshiper); (3) deadening worship by substituting stones for bread (the loss of the Word of God); (4) perverting worship with emotional, self-indulgent experiences at the expense of true liturgy; and (5) exploiting worship with market-driven values.<sup>2</sup> After observing trends in worship for a half century, I agree with Humphrey completely.

In the interest of fairness and full disclosure, I should share the experiences that have shaped me spiritually and that have been formative in the passion with which I write this book. I came to faith and was nurtured through the ministry of a small Mennonite Brethren church in rural Saskatchewan, Canada. Since my father was a pastor, devoted to the study and proclamation of the Word of God, and since my mother was an incredible woman of prayer, I was introduced to the practice of worship very early in my life. In our home, each day began with morning devotions. When the oldest boys had come in from milking the cows, we would all sit around the table, and my father would read from his big German Bible. We would then sing a song, picked by one of the children (we took turns from oldest to youngest), and then we would stand up to pray (a posture brought by my father from Russia in 1926). When I was young, my father's prayers seemed to go on forever. Meanwhile, the porridge was getting cold and stiff.

Evening devotions were conducted in our bedrooms. We children had three bedrooms upstairs: one for my sister and the other two—labeled “Kids’ Ward” and “Men’s Ward”—had to do for twelve brothers. (We grew up sleeping three in a bed. Those of us in the younger half would be happy when an older brother left home, because this allowed the next in line to graduate from the Kids’ Ward to the room where the big boys slept.) The occupants of each ward would sit on the edges of their beds while one of the brothers read from the Bible. Then we would kneel and pray—always from oldest to youngest. On more than one occasion, by the time it was the youngest guy’s turn to pray, he would be sound asleep on his knees. The rest of us would quietly crawl under our blankets, snickering, and taking bets on how long this kid would remain in this position.

This was family worship for us six decades ago. As I write, those scenes seem worlds away. But we still worship. To be sure, our patterns of worship

2. Edith M. Humphrey, *Grand Entrance: Worship on Earth as in Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 155–87.



have changed. Since those early days our family's church affiliations have moved successively from Mennonite Brethren to Evangelical Free, the Brethren Assembly (in Great Britain), the Baptist General Conference, and Southern Baptist. Now my wife, Ellen, and I attend College Church, an independent church in Wheaton, Illinois, with roots in Congregationalism. Besides being a part of these varied congregations, I have served as interim pastor and preached in innumerable contexts, ranging from small, independent church plants to the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Saint Paul in Minnesota. I have also preached in Colombia, England, Denmark, Greece, Russia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kenya. Over the course of seven decades, I have had the supreme joy of witnessing God's people at worship in many forms and styles.

These experiences have forced me to ask a host of questions about the nature of true worship. What kinds of worship are appropriate? More specifically, what kinds of worship represent true worship of the one true and living God? And how do we determine this? In recent decades people have answered these questions in vastly different ways. On one end of the spectrum, we find churches like Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, and Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, which take their cues from their surrounding cultures. On the other end, we find many making the move to Canterbury, Rome, or Byzantium, where centuries-old liturgical patterns of worship are used and contemporary culture is resisted. Indeed, these days if people ask what kind of church you attend, they are probably not inquiring about denomination, but about worship style: traditional, liturgical, or contemporary? Whereas past debates about worship revolved around the use of musical instruments, creeds, formal benedictions, confessions of sin, and prepared prayers, in many congregations today they revolve around musical style.

Readers of this volume will want to consult the works of others who have provided superb studies of worship in the Scriptures. I especially commend *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, by David Peterson.<sup>3</sup> Although it lacks the balance we seek here, it offers a thorough New Testament theology of worship. Alongside this volume, Allen P. Ross offers an excellent study in *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation*.<sup>4</sup> Ross traces the history of worship in the Scriptures, beginning with worship in the garden of Eden and concluding with worship in the book of Revelation. Along the way he offers invaluable counsel for establishing credible and authentic worship practices today.

3. David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

4. Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006).

Although the perspectives I present in this volume generally agree with those of Ross, I have arranged my material topically rather than serially. Each chapter is a study of its own. I begin by asking three fundamental questions: What do the Scriptures have in mind when they speak of worship (chap. 1)? Who is the object of true worship (chap. 2)? Whose worship is acceptable to God (chap. 3)? Building on chapter 3, chapters 4 and 5 explore worship as expressed outside of corporate gatherings, in one's personal ethics, vocation, and home life. Chapters 6–10 turn to corporate worship, focusing on elements that have become vital to Christian worship: the ordinances (chap. 6), the ministry of the Word (chap. 7), prayer (chap. 8), music (chap. 9), and offerings and sacrifice (chap. 10). The final three chapters return to more general topics: the place of corporate worship within the drama of life (chap. 11), the importance of space set aside for worship (chap. 12), and the role of leaders in promoting genuine worship (chap. 13). Readers will notice that the bulk of the discussion involves exploration of specific biblical texts to establish patterns of worship and the underlying theological convictions that are rooted in Scripture. Many chapters end with practical suggestions for implementing biblical-theological principles in worship today.

This book is intended for the church—not only for pastors and church leaders but also for laypeople. I have selected, arranged, and presented these topics to orient readers to biblical perspectives and to encourage conversation among the people of God. Although each chapter is an independent unit, I hope that by organizing the book into thirteen chapters this volume might serve as a resource for quarterly Bible studies or adult classes as well as semester courses in colleges and seminaries. Since the analyses presented are grounded in the Scriptures and essential orthodox theological commitments, this volume should have broad if not universal appeal. Because a biblical theology of worship should underlie all worship, most of the principles espoused here apply across denominational, cultural, and geographic boundaries.

Finally, this volume presents *a* biblical theology of worship. This is neither the definitive nor the last word on the subject. On the contrary, what is written here is written in soft-lead pencil, subject to revision based on further study of the Scriptures and the counsel of the community of faith. I offer this work to the church as a resource, not so much to give answers to issues that congregations face, as to provoke and inspire discussion. For every opinion expressed, readers should adopt the attitude of the Bereans (or Bereans) in Acts 17:11, who, upon hearing Paul and Silas, examined the Scriptures to see if their teaching was true. If it was necessary for the Bereans to check Paul's words, how much more needful is it for readers to subject my interpretations to the standard of the Scriptures? In the end, God is most glorified and his

people most transformed when they worship him, not according to the whims of a fallen human interpreter, but in response to his revelation of himself and in accordance with his will.

I conclude the preface with an explanation for my rendering of the divine name in the First Testament with the four consonants YHWH (the Tetragrammaton).<sup>5</sup> In the period between the Testaments, Jews stopped pronouncing the name and substituted it with the title *'ādônāy*, which means “Lord, Master.” This practice is reflected in the Greek translation of the First Testament, the Septuagint, where YHWH is consistently rendered as *kyrios*, “Lord,” which translates *'ādônāy* rather than transliterating the name represented by YHWH. This practice carries over into the New Testament, where quotations of texts from the First Testament also consistently render YHWH as *kyrios*, and into English translations as “LORD.” In print the capitalization of all the letters helpfully distinguishes this epithet from *'ādônāy*, which is properly represented by “Lord,” but in oral reading the two are indistinguishable. This creates significant interpretive problems, since most readers of Scripture pay no attention to the capitalized spelling, even though the connotations and implications of referring to someone by name or by title are quite different. Traditionally, when rendered as a name, English translations have vocalized YHWH as “Jehovah,”<sup>6</sup> which artificially combines the consonants of YHWH with the vowels of *'ādônāy*. Although the original pronunciation of the name is uncertain, today non-Jewish scholars generally reject the artificial construct “Jehovah” and prefer to render the name as “Yahweh,” which is also a hypothetical form. I am grateful that God expressly revealed his name to his people and invited them to address him by name (e.g., Exod. 3:13–15). Because of the uncertainty of the name’s original vocalization and in deference to Jewish sensibilities, in this volume I render the divine name simply with the English letters of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. The only exceptions occur in direct quotations of English versions or secondary authors that use “LORD.”

5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of biblical texts are my own. Where the English and Hebrew or Septuagint numbers differ, I have indicated the latter inside square brackets: e.g., Ps. 22:23 [24].

6. See Exod. 6:3; Ps. 83:18; Isa. 12:2; 26:4. The form is also reflected (cf. KJV) in the names Jehovah-jireh (Gen. 22:14), Jehovah-nissi (Exod. 17:15), and Jehovah-shalom (Judg. 6:24).

# Acknowledgments

The present volume has a long history. My concern for the subject of worship practices was inspired in part by worship experiences with God's people in many parts of the world and in part by observing the frustrations many have expressed over the changes in worship happening in their churches. For some any change is unwelcome; for others no change is enough. How shall we address these conflicting perspectives? Some congregations unravel over tensions in "worship style" while others spring up overnight catering to the particular stylistic whims of specific demographic groups. And a full building is viewed as proof that what they are doing must be right.

The seed for this volume was planted by discussions with friends two decades ago when we began to ask, "What does God think of what we are doing?" Of course this led to several additional questions: "Does it matter what God thinks of what we are doing?" "How can we know what God thinks of what we are doing?" In reflecting on these questions I became increasingly convinced that the answers may only be determined by careful attention to the Scriptures, our only sure and authoritative guide for spiritual truth.

Along the way many have aided and inspired me with their responses to these questions, whether in writing or through their public addresses or through personal conversation. I am especially grateful to Daniel Akin (currently president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary [Wake Forest] and formerly vice president and academic dean of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary [Louisville]) and the music faculty of the latter institution for encouraging me to develop a course on "A Biblical Theology of Worship." The syllabus for that course has evolved into the present manuscript. It has been a special delight to share my discoveries with hundreds of students in academic institutions around the world. Whether at Wheaton College or in Hong Kong or in

Greece, it has been exciting to watch eyes light up as students grasp biblical insights and especially as those insights translate into changes in dispositions and practices of personal and corporate worship. I have also been inspired by God's people in the churches as I have had opportunity to test my theories within the contexts of specific congregations. Their responses keep reminding me that conversations about worship should not be restricted to "professional worshippers," that is, worship leaders. Worship that pleases God should be everyone's concern. I am especially grateful for the friendship of colleagues whose insights have prodded me to reassess my own views and inspired me to follow them in their thinking on these matters: Chip Stam, Tom Bolton, Donald Hustad, Chuck King, Gerard and Jane Sundberg, to name just a few.

More practically, I am grateful for a series of doctoral students who have assisted me in my thinking on these matters and who have aided me at various stages in the development of this volume: Kenneth Turner, Rebekah Josberger, Christopher Ansberry, Rahel Schafer, and Matt Newkirk. I am especially grateful to Heather Surls, for her invaluable assistance in editing and reducing a much larger manuscript to the present size. In the end my graduate assistants Daniel Lanz and Michelle Knight, as well as my wife Ellen, spent long hours on the tedious work of indexing. I am grateful to them all.

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on our behalf. I eagerly also acknowledge Ellen, the delight of my life, who has stood by me as a gracious friend and counselor for more than four decades. Without her love and wisdom the work represented here either would never have been finished or would have taken a different turn.

Words cannot express the debt of gratitude I owe to those who planted the seeds for my disposition toward worship, particularly toward life as worship over the years. My father, Isaac H. Block, an immigrant to Canada from Stalinist Russia in 1926 and a faithful Mennonite Brethren minister, inspired me with his love for the Scriptures and his extraordinary orthopraxy: for him life was worship. My siblings and I all remember our mother Ella Block as a woman of prayer. Indeed, when we heard of her sudden passing into glory fifteen years ago my first thought was, now who will pray for us? Specific praise must go to the two special people to whom this book is dedicated, my father- and mother-in-law, David and Elma Lepp. David was a dairy farmer in northern Saskatchewan, but his heart was in the church, where he taught an adult Sunday school class and directed the music for more than three decades. Elma's expressions of worship were different; she resisted standing before people but delighted in working behind the scenes to ensure that others were cared for and that worship in its variegated forms happened "in decency and order."

Finally, in reflecting on the production of a book like this, it would be hypocritical not to declare that ultimately all praise and glory must go to God. Unlike others who serve gods of wood and stone, that have eyes but don't see, ears but don't hear, and mouths but don't speak, we have a God who speaks. By his grace he revealed himself to Israel by name, deed, and word, but he has revealed himself to us climactically and superlatively in the person of Jesus Christ. To him be ultimate praise and glory.

The tasks to which the Lord has called us offer unlimited opportunities to express true worship. This book is offered to God as a reverential act of submission and homage in response to his gracious revelation of himself. We praise God for these opportunities and hope that our efforts will bring great glory to him. Adapting the words of the psalmist we pray,

Let the favor of YHWH our God be upon us;  
Establish the work of our hands—  
Yes, establish the work of our minds and our hands!  
(Psalm 90:17)

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# 1

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## Toward a Holistic, Biblical Understanding of Worship

*The time is coming—indeed it has arrived—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for worshipers who will worship him this way. (John 4:23)<sup>1</sup>*

To be human is to worship. This statement is supported in the Scriptures,<sup>2</sup> declared in our creeds,<sup>3</sup> and evident from history. While the impulse to worship someone higher than ourselves seems innate, the types of beings that people worship are diverse. These may be plotted along a continuum, from concrete objects identified with divinities (animism) to the abstraction of divinity and the separation of God from material reality.<sup>4</sup> Secular historians assume that this continuum reflects the evolutionary development of religion from primitive to sophisticated, and that modern, Western secularism—liberated from notions of divine realities—represents the zenith of history.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of biblical texts are my own.

2. Note the inclusive nature of Ps. 150:6: “Let all who have breath praise YHWH.”

3. Note the first question posed by the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) and the answer proposed: “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

4. For further discussion, see “Idolatry: The Problem of False Worship” in chap. 2, below.

We are concerned with Christian worship here, which in its orthodox forms is committedly monotheistic but also mysteriously trinitarian, acknowledging the one Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In recent decades the evangelical church in North America and Europe has struggled to establish broadly appealing patterns of worship, a struggle we have exported to other parts of the world. Frequently the tensions revolve around music and whether it should follow traditional or contemporary tastes. Increasingly we see congregations respond to these tensions in one of three ways: (1) they split into two or more churches, so each is free to pursue its preferences; (2) they establish multiple worship services, each gratifying one of these musical tastes; or (3) they adopt the philosophy of the contemporary music and worship industry, simply marginalizing those with traditional hymnic preferences and forcing them to leave or retreat into passive, resigned modes. While these responses have made worship attractive for younger people, their effects on the church's witness are disastrous. Instead of worship uniting God's people, conflicts over worship have divided them.

### The Scriptural Basis of Worship That Glorifies God

In the hubbub over worship styles, I sometimes wonder if we have explored seriously enough what the Scriptures have to say about acceptable worship. In evangelicals' recent fascination with ancient practices and perspectives, we often observe a tendency to accept early worship forms as authoritative but a decreasing attention to the scriptural theology of worship. Sometimes enthusiasm for the worship traditions and practices of the early church pushes features of these as normative and threatens the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, even when these lack explicit biblical warrant.

But even if we agree that the Scriptures are our ultimate authority for faith and life, we are divided on how we should use the Scriptures in designing corporate Christian worship. On the one hand, some adhere to the *regulative principle*, which says that true worship involves only components expressly prescribed in Scripture and forbids anything not prescribed.<sup>5</sup> In extreme mani-

5. See, e.g., question 51 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. What is forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word.

Or the fuller commentary in question 109 and the answer of the Westminster Larger Catechism:

Q. What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a



festations, churches that follow this principle reject musical instruments and the singing of songs not based on the Psalms. On the other hand, many prefer the *normative principle*, which allows Christians to incorporate in their worship forms and practices not forbidden by Scripture,<sup>6</sup> provided they promote order in worship and do not contradict scriptural principles. While the former is quite restrictive, the latter opens doors to creative and expressive worship. Our challenge, then, is ensuring that even when forms of worship are culturally determined, the principles underlying them are biblically rooted and theologically formed.

But even when we agree that the Scriptures alone should be our ultimate authority for Christian worship, we are divided on which Scriptures are determinative for Christian worship. Should our worship be governed by the whole Bible or only by the teachings and practices of the New Testament?<sup>7</sup> While rarely stated, the latter is implied by many scholars who write on this subject. In what I consider to be one of the most important books on worship, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*, David Peterson sets out “to expose the discontinuity between the Testaments” on the subject of worship.<sup>8</sup> Although Peterson presents his book as a biblical theology of worship, and although the First Testament<sup>9</sup> is three times the length of the

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false religion; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature: Whatsoever; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretense: Whatsoever; simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God has appointed.

6. The principle is followed by Lutherans. Note article 15 of the Augsburg Confession: “Of Usages in the Church they teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquility and good order in the Church, as particular holy-days, festivals, and the like. Nevertheless, concerning such things men are admonished that consciences are not to be burdened, as though such observance was necessary to salvation.” However, it is more closely associated with the great sixteenth-century Anglican priest Richard Hooker and often referred to as “the Hooker Principle.”

7. For a helpful introduction to this subject, see Michael A. Farley, “What Is ‘Biblical’ Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 (2008): 591–613.

8. Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 24.

9. The dismissive disposition toward the Hebrew Bible is both reflected in and fostered by the continued designation of the prior Scriptures as the “Old Testament.” This expression connotes unfortunate notions of antiquity and out-of-dateness, as if God’s earlier revelation has been supplanted and rendered obsolete by later revelation. Observing that we have inherited the phrase from the patristic period, John Goldingay rightly questions it “because it . . . suggests something antiquated and inferior left behind by a dead person.” See his *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 15. Although the reference is not to the

New Testament and probably contains a hundred times more information on worship, Peterson disposes of its treatment of the subject in fifty-six pages, while devoting almost two hundred pages to the New Testament. For Peterson, the First Testament's focus on place, festivals, and priestly rituals provides a foil against which to interpret New Testament worship, which is centered on a person, involves all of life, and focuses on edification when it speaks of gathered Christians.<sup>10</sup>

This problem also appears in John Piper's work. In a sermon titled "Worship God!,"<sup>11</sup> Piper contrasts First Testament and New Testament worship, asserting that First Testament worship was external, involving form and ritual, while New Testament worship concerns internal spiritual experience.<sup>12</sup> Such generalizations are misleading on several counts. First, they underestimate the liturgical nature of worship in the New Testament. What can be more cultic and formal than the Lord's Supper, the worship experience par excellence prescribed by Jesus, or the ritual of baptism, called for in the Great Commission? Acts 2:41–42 describes the early church engaged in a series of external activities: baptism, instruction, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer.

Second, generalizations like these misrepresent worship as it is actually presented in the First Testament. D. A. Carson is correct to interpret Jesus' statement in John 4:21–24 as a prediction of a day when the focus of worship will shift from place to manner, and to suggest that "in spirit and in truth" is "a way of saying that we must worship God *by means of Christ*. In him the reality has dawned and the shadows are being swept away."<sup>13</sup> And Peterson is also correct to suggest that the worship "in spirit and in truth" contrasts "with

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Old Testament, when the book of Hebrews compares the previous covenant with the later one, he speaks of them as "first" (*prōtē diathēkē*) and "new" (*diathēkē kainē*) covenants, respectively (Heb. 9:15). Thus, throughout this book, I will use First Testament for the former Scriptures.

10. Similar perspectives are reflected in D. A. Carson's essay "Worship under the Word," in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 11–63. Carson cautions against exaggerating the differences between the forms of worship under the Israelite and the new covenants. However, this is what he does when he uses Rom. 12:1–2 to illustrate the change in the language of worship, which under the old covenant was bound up with temple and priestly service, but under the new departs from the cultus (37). Also, in his presentation of Christian worship, he speaks of the New Testament as our guide (44). This comment implies that the practice of first-century Christians as described and commanded in the NT alone provides the norms for Christian worship, a point observed also by Farley, "What Is 'Biblical' Worship?," 595–96.

11. John Piper, "Worship God!" (November 9, 1997), [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1997/1016\\_Worship\\_God/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1997/1016_Worship_God/).

12. Piper (*ibid.*) declares, "You can see what is happening in the NT. Worship is being significantly de-institutionalized, de-localized, de-ritualized. The whole thrust is being taken off of ceremony and seasons and places and forms; and is being shifted to what is happening in the heart—not just on Sunday, but every day and all the time in all of life."

13. Carson, "Worship under the Word," 37.

the symbolic and typical” represented by First Testament forms. However, his portrayal of worship “in truth” as “real and genuine worship” rendered by “true worshippers” is problematic.<sup>14</sup> In ancient Israel the worship of many folks was true; that is, it was both real and genuine. Peterson is also correct when he says that worship “in spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit, “who regenerates us, brings new life, and confirms us in the truth.” However, if this represents a change, then we must admit that in ancient Israel worshipers were unregenerate, lacked new life, and were not confirmed in the truth. This does not seem to match the image of Caleb, who possessed a different spirit and “was full after God” (Num. 14:24; Deut. 1:36; Josh. 14:9), or of David, who authored so many of the psalms, or of Isaiah in Isaiah 6.

Piper’s interpretation of Jesus’ statement is even more problematic.

I take “in spirit” to mean that this true worship is carried along by the Holy Spirit and is happening mainly as an inward, spiritual event, not mainly as an outward bodily event. And I take “in truth” to mean that this true worship is a response to true views of God and is shaped and guided by true views of God.<sup>15</sup>

If this is correct, and if Jesus intended to contrast First Testament and New Testament worship this way, then we must concede that in ancient Israel (1) true worship was never carried along by the Spirit, (2) worship was primarily a matter of external actions rather than inward spiritual events, and (3) the Israelites lacked true views of God that would have guided true worship. By driving these wedges between the Testaments, we dismiss the only Bible that Jesus and the New Testament authors had as irrelevant and lacking authority for us, and we sweep away significant continuities between the faith of ancient Israel and the early church. In so doing, we impose problems that may have existed within the Judaism of Jesus’ day onto ancient Israel, refuse to let the First Testament speak for itself, and deny the true worshipers in Israel the hope that YHWH offered them with his gracious revelation.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, we rob the church of a rich resource for establishing permanent theological principles that could and probably should guide our worship.

But evangelicals are often inconsistent in the way they treat the First Testament. Most believers find the Psalms to be a rich resource for personal and corporate Christian worship, but they do so without realizing that the entire

14. Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 98–99.

15. Piper, “Worship God!”

16. For a fuller discussion of the issue, see Daniel I. Block, “‘In Spirit and in Truth’: The Mosaic Vision of Worship,” in *The Gospel according to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 272–98.

Psalter is rooted in the Torah, especially the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>17</sup> To dismiss Deuteronomy and the rest of the constitutional revelation found in Exodus–Numbers as irrelevant for establishing the theology and practice of worship is to violate Paul’s own declaration in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. However, this marginalization also violates the intentions of the psalmists, who would have been horrified to observe Christians’ elevation of the authority of the Psalms above the Torah. Those who will not take seriously the authority and transformative power of the Pentateuch and the rest of the First Testament have no right to appeal, nor grounds for appealing, to the book of Psalms in worship.

In addition to a commitment to let all Scripture contribute to the recovery of a biblical theology of worship, this book is driven by two other foundational principles. First, true worship is essentially a vertical exercise, the human response to the divine Creator and Redeemer. For this reason the goal of authentic worship is the glory of God rather than the pleasure of human beings, which means that forms of worship should conform to the will of God rather than to the whims of fallen humanity. Second, knowledge of the nature and forms of worship that glorify God comes primarily from Scripture. We recognize that all truth is God’s truth and that nature proclaims the powerful Creator, which drives us to worship. However, as the written revelation of God, the Scriptures serve as the primary source for developing a theology of worship and establishing forms of worship that please God. Accordingly, in the studies that follow, we will keep our fingers in the biblical text, seeking to find in it the principles and patterns of worship that should drive us today.

## The New Testament’s Contribution to Contemporary Christian Worship

Although many find their primary cues for planning Christian worship in popular culture, evangelicals generally recognize the authoritative role of the New Testament for establishing the principles and practices of Christian worship. And we do so despite the fact that the New Testament actually provides little instruction on formal corporate gatherings. In the Gospels we find a great deal of information on Jesus Christ, the object and focus of Christian worship, but neither he nor the apostles offer detailed counsel on how we

17. This is highlighted in the so-called Torah Psalms: Pss. 1; 19; and 119. The references to “the Torah of YHWH” (generally mistranslated as “the law of the LORD”) refer not to the word of God in general but to the account of God’s actions on Israel’s behalf, the written body of revelation received at Sinai, and especially to Moses’ exposition of the revelation in Deuteronomy. See further D. I. Block, *How I Love Your Torah, O LORD! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), xi–xv.

should practice it, except to emphasize the ordinances of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:17–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–20; cf. also 1 Cor. 11:23–34) and baptism (Matt. 28:18–20). In the book of Acts, Luke narrates many scenes of the church at worship (e.g., Acts 2:41–47) but provides little concrete instruction on normative practices for the future church.

In his Epistles, Paul often deals with abuses in the churches he founded (e.g., 1 Cor. 11–14; 1 Tim. 2:8–15), and while the principles underlying Ephesians 5:15–21 and Colossians 3:12–17 have obvious implications for corporate worship, Paul's concern here is the daily conduct of believers rather than the liturgy of the church. His instructions in the Pastoral Epistles speak more to the character and conduct of those who lead the church than to the practice of corporate worship. The Epistle to the Hebrews has more to say about worship than any of the preceding texts, showing the contrasts between Christian worship and the worship of ancient Israel, while also emphasizing the continuity of worship and the importance of reverence and awe in acceptable worship. The book of Revelation provides the most detailed information on Christian worship, but this worship is located in heaven rather than on earth.

### The First Testament's Gift to Contemporary Christian Worship

But why should we not study the First Testament to understand what true worship—even for Christians—might look like? To be sure, in the light of Christ, the forms have changed—the sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood, and the temple have all been declared *passé* through the death and resurrection of Jesus—but does this mean that God's first instructions on worship have no bearing on contemporary worship? Hardly. If Jesus Christ is YHWH, the God of Israel in human flesh (Matt. 1:23; John 1:23; Rom. 10:13; Phil. 2:11), and if Jesus Christ is eternally changeless (Heb. 13:8), we should at least expect continuity of principle between the Testaments. When we explore the forms of ancient Israelite worship and their underlying theology, we discover a remarkable continuity of perspective between the Testaments. Jesus does not declare the old theology obsolete; rather, in him the theology underlying Israelite worship finds its fulfillment.

As we will see, because of Christ's sacrificial work, both the Israelite rituals were and our own corporate expressions of faith are effective in maintaining covenant relationship with God—assuming they are offered in accord with his revealed will. Although most assume that unless the New Testament reiterates notions found in the First Testament the latter are obsolete, we should probably assume the opposite: unless the New Testament expressly declares First Testament notions obsolete, they continue. This may account for the relative

silence of the New Testament on many matters, including creation, certain ethical issues, and principles of worship. Since the same Holy Spirit inspired all of Scripture, we should not hesitate to go to the First Testament to seek the mind of God for us.

## The Dimensions of Biblical Worship

A recovery of biblical worship must begin with definitions. What does the word “worship” mean? Even more important, what does the concept of worship mean? Discussion of these questions usually begins with the English word “worship,” which consists of two elements, “worth” and “ship.” As a verb, worship involves one person’s recognition of another person’s superior status or honor. Theologians often restrict the expression of this recognition toward the Deity, but this is not how worship has been traditionally understood. When I was a university student in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the mayor was the featured speaker at an event. When the time came for him to speak, he was introduced as “His worship, Mayor Buckwold.” Calling the mayor this was not an act of idolatry; it simply reflected the normal meaning of the English word.

If, however, we are trying to develop a biblical understanding of worship or an understanding of biblical worship, both the etymology and the usage of the English word are irrelevant. What matters is the vocabulary the Scriptures use for worship in general and for corporate liturgical exercises that we call worship. Although both Testaments employ a wide range of expressions for concepts and actions associated with worship, they may be divided into three broad categories: dispositional expressions (worship as attitude), physical expressions (worship as gesture), and liturgical expressions (worship as ritual). Remarkably, if not ironically, the words that are usually translated as “worship” in English versions have little to do with either praise or music, as today’s popular Christian culture suggests.

### *Worship as Attitude*

Appealing to biblical texts like 1 Samuel 16:7 for support, many suggest that God’s attitude toward us is determined by what is in our hearts rather than by our external, observable behavior. However, this idea tears such statements out of their contexts and assumes a faulty view of the relationship between one’s actions and one’s being—as if they can be divorced.<sup>18</sup>

18. This attitude is also reflected in the common adage “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.” God does in fact hate sin (Deut. 12:31; 16:22), but the Scriptures do not hesitate to use

Several biblical texts highlight the importance of a proper disposition in worship. In Psalm 24:3 the psalmist asks, “Who may climb the mountain of YHWH, and who may rise in his holy place?” which is to say, whose worship is acceptable to God? Among the answers given we find “whoever has a pure heart.”<sup>19</sup> In Deuteronomy 10:12–13, Moses gives the normative First Testament perspective in catechetical fashion.

Q. And now, O Israel, what does YHWH your God ask of you?

A. To fear [*yārē*] YHWH your God; to walk in all his ways [*hālak bēkol-dērākāyw*]; to love [*āhab*] him, to serve [*ābad*] YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your being, and to keep [*šamar*] the commands and ordinances of YHWH that I am commanding you today for your own good.

Perhaps for ease of memory, Moses summarizes the evidence of true devotion to YHWH with five verbs, one for each finger. He sets the stage with the opening verb, “to fear,” and represents the fulcrum with the middle verb, “to love.”

The primary word for “fear” in the First Testament (*yārē*) is used in two senses, depending on the relationship between the people in question. In the face of the unknown, enemy armies, wild animals, death, and even YHWH (Jer. 5:22; Mic. 7:17; Job 9:35), it often denotes “terror, fright.”<sup>20</sup> The same word was also used to express reverence for and trusting awe of a superior.<sup>21</sup> Like Deuteronomy 10:12, the Wisdom writings teach that the fear of God is the first principle of wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

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the same verb (*šānē*) to speak of God’s disposition toward people: Hosea 9:15; Mal. 1:3; Pss. 5:5; 11:5; Prov. 6:16–19.

19. The psalmist (24:4) uses a rare term, *bar* (from *brr*), which occurs elsewhere only in Pss. 19:8 [9]; 73:1; Job 11:4; Prov. 14:4; Song 6:9, 10. Here the “pure heart” (*bar-lēbāb*) substitutes for “perfection of heart” (*tom-lēbāb*, 1 Kings 9:4; Pss. 78:72; 101:2). Where the English and Hebrew or Septuagint numbers differ, I have indicated the latter inside square brackets.

20. The frequency of this word and the breadth of vocabulary in this semantic field reflect the fearful realities of life in the ancient Near East. Other expressions for terror include *šāta’*, “to be dismayed” (Isa. 41:10, 23); *hātat*, “be dismayed” (Deut. 1:21; 31:8; Josh. 8:1); *hāpaz*, “to be alarmed” (Deut. 20:3); *hārad*, “to tremble” (Isa. 41:5; 1 Sam. 28:5); *āraṣ*, “to tremble” (Deut. 7:21; 20:3); *hyl*, “to writhe in anguish, pain” (Zech. 9:5); *šārar*, “to be distressed” (Gen. 32:7 [8]); *pāhad*, “to tremble” (Deut. 2:25; 11:25).

21. This could involve respect for other human beings or objects, such as children’s respect of parents (Lev. 19:3), the people’s awe before a leader (Josh. 4:14; 1 Kings 3:28) or an object (Lev. 19:30; 26:2), or creatures’ awe before human beings as representatives of God (Gen. 9:2). Often *yārē* functions as a variant for *kibbēd*, “to honor.” Cf. Exod. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16 with Lev. 19:3.

22. Prov. 1:7, 29; 2:5; 9:10; 15:33; Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; cf. Isa. 11:2; 33:6. Second Kings 17:35, 37, 38, prohibits “fearing” other gods (see KJV).

The prophet Malachi highlights the link between fear and acceptable worship by addressing a series of problems in the postexilic community, all rooted in the absence of the fear of YHWH.<sup>23</sup> Some involve social diseases, but the book is dominated by abuses related directly to worship: contempt for the sacrifices (1:6–12, 13b), boredom in worship (1:13a), a calloused disposition toward vows (1:14), ministerial irresponsibility and infidelity (2:1–9), ingratitude and stinginess in tithing (3:7–12), and arrogance toward YHWH (3:13–15). Remarkably, Malachi’s prescription for this malaise is to return to the Torah of Moses and YHWH’s revelation at Horeb (4:4). Through hearing the Torah “in the presence of YHWH” (*lipné yhwš*), the awesome effect of God’s original self-revelation will be repeated (Deut. 14:23). Thus, reading the Torah underlies hearing, which underlies learning, which underlies fearing YHWH, which underlies obedience, which underlies life.

Reading → Hearing → Learning → *Fearing* → Obeying → Living

This perspective is found throughout the Scriptures. Responding to the people’s demand for a king, Samuel declared, “Only fear [*yārē*] YHWH and serve [*ābad*] him in truth [*be’emet*] with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you” (1 Sam. 12:24–25).<sup>24</sup> In the Psalms, true worshipers are characterized as “YHWH-fearers” (*yir’ē*).<sup>25</sup> Such worshipers glorify God and stand in awe of him (22:23 [24]); they know his covenant (25:14); they are promised blessing (5:12 [13]; cf. v. 7 [8]; 112:1; 128:1); their cries for help are heard (145:19); they walk in the ways of God (128:1); they hope in salvation (85:9 [10]); they ponder and declare the works of God (64:9 [10]); they trust in YHWH as their help and shield (115:11); and they live righteously and are secure in him (25:11–15; 34:8–22 [9–23]; 86:11; 103:17–18). As we will see, these are dimensions of true and acceptable worship.

The idea that a proper disposition is fundamental to acceptable worship carries over into the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> Like Hebrew *yārē*, Greek *phobeomai*

23. References to fear (derivatives of *yārē*) and honor (*kibbēd*) toward God or his name occur in Mal. 1:6, 14; 2:2, 5; 3:5, 16a, 16b, 4:2 [3:20]. See also 4:5 [3:23], which speaks of the great and fearful (*nōrā*) day of YHWH.

24. Jesus describes this kind of worship as worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24). For the close association of “fear” with cultic activity in YHWH’s honor, see Josh. 22:25; 2 Kings 17:32–34; Isa. 29:13.

25. Pss. 15:4; 22:23, 25 [24, 26]; 25:12, 14; 31:19 [20]; 33:18; 34:7, 9 [8, 10]; 60:4 [6]; 61:5 [6]; 85:9 [10]; 66:16; 103:11, 13, 17; 111:5; 118:4; 119:74, 79; 145:19; 147:11.

26. New Testament authors express dispositional aspects of worship with four word groups: *phobeomai*, *sebomai* (and other *seb-* words), *eusebeomai*, *eulabeomai*. The roots of all these may be traced to the LXX renderings of Hebrew *yārē*.



may express fright, but it also expresses devotion, piety, and respect.<sup>27</sup> In Acts, Luke characterizes the pious as “god-fearers” (*phoboumenoi*).<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, those with the appropriate disposition toward God are characterized as “pious/devout,”<sup>29</sup> “serving God with fear,”<sup>30</sup> and reverent.<sup>31</sup> First Timothy 6:11 is typical: “But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness [*eusebeia*], faith, love, endurance, gentleness” (NRSV).<sup>32</sup>

First and New Testament perspectives on a proper disposition as a precondition for acceptable worship are indistinguishable. This is demonstrated by the repetition of the Supreme Command, which calls God’s people to love him with all their hearts/minds (Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27); by Jesus’ citation of Isaiah 29:13 in Matthew 15:8; and by his declaration “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt. 5:8). Confronted with the glory of God, Paul fell to the ground in reverence and awe (Acts 9:4), as do the heavenly worshipers in Revelation 5:14. Echoing First Testament images and language, the author of Hebrews challenged his original readers and challenges us.

Having received a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, offering worship [*latreuō*] to God that is acceptable [*euarestōs*] with reverence [*eulabeia*] and awe [*deos*],<sup>33</sup> for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:28–29)

27. Luke 1:50; cf. Pss. 23:4; 103:11, 13, 17.

28. Acts 10:2, 22, 35 (Cornelius); 13:16, 26 (Israelites in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch). These seem to be practicing Jews, but in v. 43 Luke calls God-fearing converts to Judaism *sebomenoi prosēlytoi*, “proselyte fearers,” which corresponds to *yir’ē*, “YHWH-fearers” in the Psalms (as in Ps. 15:4). Occasionally the word also functions as a substitute for faith and means “trusting awe”: Rom. 11:20; 2 Cor. 5:11 (cf. the references to being of good courage in vv. 6, 8); 2 Cor. 7:11; perhaps Phil. 2:12.

29. Greek *eulabeia/eulabēs/eulabeomai*: thus, e.g., Simeon was “righteous and pious” (*dikaios kai eulabēs*, Luke 2:25). See also Acts 2:5; 8:2; 22:12; Heb. 5:7; 11:7.

30. The *sebomai* word group: note Jesus’ quotation of Isa. 29:13 in Matt. 15:8–9 (= Mark 7:6–7). See also Acts 16:14; 18:7; 18:13. In Rom. 1:25 Paul charges the ungodly with exchanging the truth of God for a lie and misdirecting their “worship” (*sebazomai*) and cultic service (*latreuein*) away from the Creator to the creature. The expression *sebō* refers to expressions of devotion to a god through gestures, rites, and ceremonies. In New Testament times it referred to “former polytheists who accepted the ethical monotheism of Israel and attended the synagogue, but who did not obligate themselves to keep the whole Mosaic law; in particular, the males did not submit to circumcision.” Thus W. Bauer, F. Danker, W. Arndt, and F. Gingrich, eds. [BDAG], *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 918. Cf. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.110. On the expression, see Michael Wilcox (“The ‘God-Fearers’ in Acts: A Reconsideration,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13 [1981]: 102–22), who suggests the emphasis is on piety, not a group’s distinctiveness.

31. The *eusebeō* word group: Acts 10:2, 7; 2 Pet. 2:9; 2 Tim. 3:12; Titus 2:12. The abstract noun *eusebeia*, “piety, godliness, loyalty, fear of God,” is common.

32. See, e.g., Acts 3:12; 1 Tim. 2:2; 3:16; 4:7–8; 6:3, 5–6; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:3, 6.

33. The author adds to the awe by using a word, *deos*, that occurs nowhere else in the First or New Testaments. In extrabiblical Greek the word means “fear, alarm, reverence.” See H. G.

This statement warns against treating worship casually; without a proper disposition, our worship of the living God is rejected.

### *Worship as Physical Gesture*

Consideration of the gestures of worship in Scripture must begin with the Hebrew word *hištaḥāwâ* and its Greek counterpart, *proskyneō*. Although English translations commonly render both verbs as “worship,” most people have no clue what these words communicate in the Bible. Both literally refer to subjects prostrated before a superior, a posture that states the equivalent of “Long live the king.”<sup>34</sup> This interpretation is reinforced by adverbial modifiers that appear with the Hebrew word: “to the ground,”<sup>35</sup> “with nose/face to the ground,”<sup>36</sup> and “to/on his nose” (Num. 22:31), as well as a series of other verbs with which it is associated: “to bow one’s head” in homage,<sup>37</sup> “to crouch” or “fall to one’s knees” before God or a king,<sup>38</sup> “to prostrate oneself,”<sup>39</sup> or simply “to fall down.”<sup>40</sup> Two texts illustrate dramatically the meaning of *hištaḥāwâ*:

Kings will be your foster fathers,  
and their queens your nursing mothers.  
With their faces to the ground they will bow down [*hištaḥāwâ*] to you,  
and lick the dust of your feet.  
Then you will know that I am YHWH;  
those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. (Isa. 49:23)

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Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, and R. McKenzie [LSJM], *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 379, s.v. δέοϛ.

34. Contra Peterson (*Engaging with God*, 57–58, 75) and Andrew Hill (*Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* [Nashville: Star Song, 1993], 7), the Hebrew word is a Hishtaphel form of the root *ḥāyâl/hāwâ*, “to live.” For full discussion see Siegfried Kreuzer, “Zur Bedeutung und Etymologie von *hištaḥāwâ/yšthwy*,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 39–60; cf. also T. Fretheim, in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE], ed. W. A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2:42–44.

35. See, e.g., Gen. 18:2; 24:52; Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam. 25:23; 2 Kings 2:15; 4:37.

36. See, e.g., Gen. 19:1; 42:6; 48:12; 1 Sam. 25:41; 2 Sam. 14:33; Isa. 49:23; Neh. 8:6.

37. Hebrew *qādād* is related to *godqōd*, “head, skull,” and Akkadian *qadādu*, “to bow very low.” Second Chron. 29:30 links the word with verbal praise. Hebrew *kāpap* occurs in a “worshipful” sense in Mic. 6:6. Elsewhere it reflects imposed humiliation (Isa. 58:5; Pss. 57:6 [7]; 145:14; 146:8).

38. Hebrew *kāraʿ* (Esther 3:2, 5; Pss. 22:29 [30]; 95:6; 2 Chron. 29:29). Cf. Judg. 7:5–6; 1 Kings 8:54; 19:18; 2 Kings 1:13; Ezra 9:5; Ps. 72:9; Isa. 45:23. Hebrew *bārak* in the sense of “kneel” is rare (Ps. 95:6; cf. Gen. 24:11 [of camels]; 2 Chron. 6:13).

39. Hebrew *sāgad* (Dan. 3:5–28; cf. also 2:46). The word occurs with *hištaḥāwâ* in Isa. 44:15, 19; 46:6.

40. Hebrew *nāpal* (Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam. 20:41; 2 Sam. 1:2; 14:4; 2 Kings 4:37; Job 1:20).

O come, let us prostrate [*hištaḥwā*] and bow down [*kāra*'],  
 let us kneel [*bārak*] before YHWH, our Maker!  
 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,  
 and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:7)

The prostration expressed by *hištaḥwā* and other similar words was not limited to the worship of the Deity. In the ancient world and many cultures today, lower-class individuals would customarily prostrate before social, economic, and political superiors.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 1.1. A second-millennium-BC Egyptian image of homage on limestone from the necropolis at Thebes (From Adolf Erman, *Ägypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum*, edited by H. Ranke [Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1923], 477, figure 188, attributed ultimately to Achille-Constant-Théodore-Émile Prisse D’Avennes, *Histoire de l’art Égyptien d’après les monuments depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à la domination romaine* [Paris: A. Bertrand, 1878], Dessin #3.)

Although people in the Bible often responded spontaneously to divine favor or revelation with prostration,<sup>42</sup> the gesture is also common in formal ritual contexts. In Genesis 22:5 Abraham instructs his servants to wait at the bottom of Mount Moriah while he and Isaac go up the mountain to “worship” (*hištaḥwā*). When Solomon had finished building the temple and the divine glory took up residence there, the people bowed (*kāra*’) on the pavement with their noses to the ground, prostrated themselves (*hištaḥwā*), and gave thanks to YHWH (2 Chron. 7:3). Centuries later, at a communal gathering probably at this same place, all the people stood to their feet when Ezra rose and opened the Torah

scroll. After he had blessed them, they responded with a verbal “Amen! Amen!” and raised their hands; they bowed their heads (*qādad*) and prostrated themselves (*hištaḥwā*) before YHWH (Neh. 8:6).

The motif of prostration before YHWH is especially common in the Psalms and Isaiah,<sup>43</sup> where descriptions of such gestures are not limited to Israel. Psalmists (22:27–29 [28–30]; 72:11; 86:9) and prophets (Isa. 49:7; Zeph. 2:11)

41. For a variety of First Testament examples, see Gen. 19:1; 23:7, 12; 33:3; 42:6; 43:26, 28; Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam. 20:41; 24:8 [9]; 28:14; 2 Kings 2:15. For examples in royal courts, see 2 Sam. 14:4, 22, 33; 15:5; 16:4; 2 Chron. 24:17. These verbs appear naturally in royal psalms: Pss. 22:29 [30]; 72:9, 11.

42. See Gen. 24:26, 48, 52; Exod. 4:31; 34:8; Num. 22:31; Josh. 5:14; Judg. 7:15; 2 Sam. 12:20; 1 Kings 1:47; Job 1:20.

43. See Pss. 22:27, 29 [28, 30]; 29:2; 86:9; 95:6; 96:9; 132:7; 138:2; Isa. 27:13; 45:14; 49:7; 60:14; 66:23.



Figure 1.2. A first-millennium-BC Neo-Assyrian image of homage (Photograph by Kim Walton, courtesy of the British Museum. Used with permission.)

envision a day when all kings and nations will prostrate themselves before YHWH. Indeed, poets even speak of heavenly creatures as worshipping before him (Pss. 29:1–2; 97:7). Note especially Nehemiah 9:6:

You are YHWH, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven are prostrate [*hištaḥwā*] before you.

Following the lead of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (abbreviated LXX), the New Testament replaces Hebrew *hištaḥwā* with *proskyneō*, whose range of meaning is similar.<sup>44</sup> While the roots of the word are obscure, the verb expresses the widespread custom of kneeling before a superior and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, or the ground, and in a derived sense means “to worship.”<sup>45</sup> The word occurs many times in the Gospels and Acts—though as a general term for Christian worship only in Acts 24:11—and in Revelation. These physical expressions of homage always occur before superiors who are truly or supposedly divine.<sup>46</sup> The New Testament

44. Hebrew *hištaḥwā* and Aramaic *sēgid* are rendered in the LXX almost exclusively with *proskyneō*, though this word is occasionally also used for *nāšaq*, “to kiss” (1 Kings 19:18); *abad*, “to serve” (Ps. 97:7); and *kāra*, “to bow/bend the knee.”

45. See H. Greeven, “*proskyneō*, *proskynētēs*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [TDNT], ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 6:758–66. Scholars generally view *proskyneō* as a combination of *pros*, “toward,” and *kyneō*, “to kiss.”

46. God (Matt. 4:10; John 4:20, 21, 22, 23, 24; 1 Cor. 14:25; Rev. 7:11; 11:16; 14:7; 15:4; 19:4, 10; 22:9), God incarnate in Jesus (Matt. 2:2, 8, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9, 17;

uses several additional words to speak of physical prostration as a gesture of worship. Sometimes, such homage is described simply as “falling down” (*piptō*)<sup>47</sup> or “kneeling down” (*gonypeteō*) before a person.<sup>48</sup> Such genuflection expresses self-abasement, submission, or worship.

Some argue that the infrequency of *proskyneō* in Paul’s writings highlights the discontinuity between First and New Testament worship. Since in ancient Israel worship focused on place and external expressions, supposedly place and external forms are irrelevant in Christian worship because of the shift to worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). And since in the Gospels Jesus is physically present to receive worship, Paul’s Letters assume that the day announced in John 4:20–21 has arrived.

This interpretation is doubtful on several counts. First, the argument is grounded on silence. Just because Paul uses *proskyneō* only in 1 Corinthians 14:25 does not mean he rejects the propriety of physical gestures of homage in Christian worship. On the contrary, in this context he speaks quite naturally of an unbeliever entering the assembly of God’s people, being convicted of his sin, falling on his face and worshipping (*proskyneō*), and verbally acknowledging that God is among them. Indeed, the absence of the word elsewhere in Paul’s writings could mean that he assumes that traditional understandings continue. Nowhere does he or anyone else declare that the work of Christ renders genuflection outmoded and obsolete.

Second, this emphasis on the contrast between the exteriority and cultic nature of First Testament worship and the interiority and spiritual nature of Christian worship reflects a misunderstanding of true Israelite worship. Beginning with Cain and Abel and running through the Torah and the Prophets, we see that the heart and life of a person provided the lens through which their

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Mark 5:6; 15:19; Luke 24:52; John 9:38; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 4:10; 5:14; 7:11), Satan (Matt. 4:9; Luke 4:7, 8), demons (Rev. 9:20), the dragon (13:4), the beast and his image (13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), images (Acts 7:43; cf. Amos 5:26), and angels (Rev. 19:10 and 22:8–9, where the interpreting angel rejects John’s homage). Cf. Greeven, in *TDNT* 6:763.

47. Greek *piptō*: without a modifier, Matt. 18:29; Rev. 5:14; before a person, Rev. 4:10; 5:8; 7:11; on one’s face, Matt. 17:6; 26:39; Luke 5:12; 17:16; 1 Cor. 14:25; Rev. 7:11; 11:16; on/to the ground, Mark 14:35; on/at/before someone’s feet, Matt. 18:29; Luke 8:41; 17:16; Mark 5:22; John 11:32; Acts 10:25; Rev. 4:10; 5:8; 7:11; 19:10. This physical gesture accompanies verbal petitions (Mark 5:22 = Luke 8:41; Luke 5:12), expressions of gratitude (Luke 17:16), greetings (John 11:32), or prayers (Matt. 26:39 = Mark 14:35).

48. In Matt. 27:29 *gonypeteō* is used of the soldiers’ mocking homage of Jesus the king (the parallel in Mark 15:19 uses the fuller expression *tithenai ta gonata*, “to place, give the knee”); cf. the explicit expression “to bend the knee” (*kamptō ta gonata*) in Rom. 11:4; Eph. 3:14; Phil. 2:10. This gesture precedes a verbal petition in Matt. 17:14; Mark 1:40 (the parallel in Matt. 8:2 reads *proskyneō*); 10:17. Indeed, prayer itself may be referred to periphrastically as “to give/set the knees” (*tithenai ta gonata*, Luke 22:41 [the parallels in Matt. 26:39 and Mark 14:35 read “he fell on his face” and “he fell to the ground,” respectively]; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5).

worship was evaluated. While Deuteronomy has a great deal to say about worship, it says virtually nothing about the externals. The focus is entirely on worship “in spirit and in truth.”<sup>49</sup>

Third, this view overlooks the hard evidence of Paul’s own practice and writings. In Acts 24:11 he declares that he arrived in Jerusalem twelve days earlier for the purpose of worship (*proskyneō*). Before he leaves Ephesus, Paul kneels down (*tithenai ta gonata*) and prays with the elders (Acts 20:36), and later he does the same at Tyre (Acts 21:5). In Ephesians 3:14 Paul expresses his awe for having been chosen as the object and vehicle of God’s amazing grace by “bending my knee” (*kamptō ta gonata mou*) before the Father. According to Romans 11:4 Paul found inspiration for the faithful in his day in the seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal in Elijah’s day.<sup>50</sup> Most important, in Philippians 2:10 he declares that God has exalted Jesus for the express purpose of gaining the obeisance (*pan gony kamptō*) of all.

Finally, this insistence on the contrast between First Testament and New Testament worship misunderstands John 4:20–21. Jesus does not announce the end of genuflection and the beginning of inner, spiritual worship in this passage. As if to highlight the continuity of prostration, in verses 21–24 he uses the word *proskyneō* eight times. Jesus’ point was not that inner submission has replaced external gestures or that individualistic devotion has replaced corporate expressions of worship. The change is in the place of worship. Since Jesus is both the temple and the object of worship, future prostration before the Father will be disconnected from Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup>

Many evangelical churches resist physical prostration as an expression of homage and submission before God. This resistance represents both an unfortunate overreaction to Roman Catholic abuses and the arrogance of our culture. Although genuflection before a superior is universally recognized as a legitimate expression of respect, Western culture, impatient with expressions of deference, has discarded these millennia-old symbolic gestures.<sup>52</sup>

49. See further Block, “Mosaic Vision of Worship,” 272–98.

50. In quoting 1 Kings 19:18 in Rom. 11:4, Paul substitutes *kamptō* for LXX *oklazō* (for Hebrew *kāra*, “to bend [the knee]”). Greek *oklazō*, “to crouch down, squat,” occurs elsewhere in LXX only in 1 Sam. 4:19 (crouching to give birth) and 1 Kings 8:54 (Solomon arose from his knees).

51. On which, see further Daniel I. Block, “Eden: A Temple? A Reassessment of the Biblical Evidence,” in *From Creation to New Creation: Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, edited by D. M. Gurtner and B. L. Gladd (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 3–32.

52. Note the furor in politically conservative circles over President Obama’s bowing before foreign dignitaries when greeting them. For representative images, see <http://www.google.com/search?q=obama-bows-before-japan-emperor-hirohito&hl=en&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=o102UcesCoe70QG0qIDICg&ved=0CDwQsAQ&biw=800&bih=403>; <http://sharprightturn.wordpress.com/2009/04/02/obama-bows-to-saudi-king/>.

Of course, prostration is not the only physical gesture by which to express homage before God. Worship often involves other physical postures (lying, sitting, standing), as well as actions performed with the hands (clapping, raising of hands) or feet (marching in procession, dancing, jumping). For the moment, we observe only that the dominant physical gesture of worship in the Scriptures is prostration. Our contemporary squabbles over worship rarely—if ever—include discussions of physically bending the knee before God, which may be a measure of how uninterested people are in truly biblical worship. Surely worship that pleases God involves bodily gestures of subordination and submission.

### Worship as Cultic Ritual

In evangelical circles, the word “cult” is generally associated with religious groups that appear to resemble historic Christianity but replace cardinal Christian doctrines with heretical views.<sup>53</sup> In popular media the word identifies a small, often sinister religious group—usually led by a charismatic leader—that brainwashes its members and promotes the notion of the imminent end of the world. Here and throughout this book, I use the term “cult” according to its classical definition, relating not to fringe religious groups but to legitimate forms and systems of religious worship, especially external rites and ceremonies where homage is given to divine beings.<sup>54</sup> Such rituals may express the piety of individuals, families, or larger communities. Our exploration into how the Scriptures speak about cultic rituals will begin with general expressions and then move to specific vocabulary.

In the First Testament, Hebrew *‘abad*, “to serve,” is the most general expression associated with cultic service. By definition, one who “serves” advances the agenda of another person either by carrying out the superior’s agenda or simply by living according to the superior’s will. Many important Israelite figures, cultic and otherwise, bore the title “YHWH’s servant” (*‘ebed yhw*).<sup>55</sup> This epithet does not suggest menial roles but reflects an elevated status;

53. The popular book on the subject, Walter Martin’s *Kingdom of the Cults*, ed. R. Zacharias, rev. ed. (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House: 2003), investigates Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon), Scientology, and the Unification Church, among others.

54. See the definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1246.

55. Abraham (Ps. 105:6, 42); Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Exod. 32:13); Caleb (Num. 14:24); Moses (e.g., Exod. 14:31; Josh. 1:1); Joshua (Josh. 24:29; Judg. 2:8); David (e.g., 2 Sam. 7; 1 Kings 8:66); Elijah (2 Kings 10:10); the prophets (2 Kings 17:13).

those so designated had access to YHWH's court and were sent out to represent him. At Sinai the Israelites ceased to be the slaves (*'ābādīm*) of Pharaoh (Exod. 5:15–15) and were formally inducted into the office of “vassal” (*'ebed*) of YHWH, commissioned with his agenda.<sup>56</sup> According to Deuteronomy 10:12–11:1, Israelites would fulfill this role by fearing YHWH, walking in his ways, demonstrating covenant commitment to him, serving (*'abad*) him wholeheartedly, and obeying all his commands. All of life was to be an expression of service to YHWH.

However, the verb “to serve” *may* involve cultic service to YHWH. In the Exodus narratives, Moses begs Pharaoh to release the Israelites so they may go on a three-day journey into the desert to “serve” YHWH.<sup>57</sup> Since Exodus 5:1 specifies the event as a “feast for YHWH,” and since other texts speak of sacrificial rituals (*zēbaḥ*, *zēbāḥîm*)<sup>58</sup> and whole burnt offerings (10:25–26), some translations render the word as “worship.” In the regulations concerning the tabernacle rituals, the root is often used of Levitical and priestly ministry,<sup>59</sup> and Numbers 16:9 refers to the ritual as “serving the service [*'abad 'ābōdâ*] of the tabernacle of YHWH.” The word may also be used of cultic service for other gods;<sup>60</sup> however, this cultic usage is not the most common.

A second expression, *šērēt*, “to minister, serve,” involves a narrower range of meaning. Like *'abad*, this verb speaks fundamentally of service rendered to a superior by a person of lower rank, often as a personal attendant,<sup>61</sup> and may apply directly to the “ministry to God.”<sup>62</sup> However, usually the verb refers to cultic service involving the sanctuary,<sup>63</sup> the altar (Exod. 30:20; Joel 1:9, 13) and cultic instruments and furniture,<sup>64</sup> or to service as temple guards (Ezek. 44:11). Elsewhere we learn this service also involved music (1 Chron. 6:32

56. Although the terms are not used, Exod 19:4–6 summarizes that mission. Here YHWH charges Israel with the same mission he had assigned earlier to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1–3; 17:1–8; 18:19).

57. See Exod. 3:12; 4:23; 7:16; 8:1 [7:26], 16 [20]; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7, 8, 11, 24, 26; 12:31.

58. See Exod. 5:3, 8, 17; 8:8, 25–29 [21–25]; 10:25.

59. As in Num. 3:7–8; 4:23, 30, 47; 8:11, 19–26. Note also the noun *'ābōdâ*, “service” (e.g., Exod. 12:25–26; Num. 4:4, 19, 47; 18:7, 21, 23; Josh. 22:27; 1 Chron. 6:32, 48; 2 Chron. 34:13; 35:16; Neh. 10:37 [38]).

60. See, e.g., Deut. 4:19; 8:19; 2 Kings 10:18–19, 21–23.

61. See, e.g., Gen. 39:4; 40:4; Exod. 24:13; Num. 3:6; Josh. 1:1; 1 Kings 19:21; 2 Kings 4:43; 6:15; 2 Chron. 8:14. In royal contexts it refers to courtly attendants (2 Sam. 13:17–18; 1 Kings 1:4; 10:5; 2 Chron. 22:8; Esther 1:10) or military officials (1 Chron. 27:1; 28:1).

62. See Deut. 10:8 (“to stand before YHWH and serve Him”); 17:12; 18:5, 7; 21:5; 1 Sam. 2:11, 18; 3:1; 1 Chron. 15:2; 23:13; 2 Chron. 13:10; 29:11. Isaiah 56:6 and 61:6 look forward to a day when foreigners and laypeople will serve YHWH; Pss. 103:21 and 104:4 speak of heavenly beings serving (*šērēt*) him.

63. As in Num. 1:50; Ezek. 44:27; 45:4–5; 46:24.

64. See Num. 3:31; 4:9, 12, 14; 2 Kings 25:14 = Jer. 52:18; 2 Chron. 24:14.



[17]), handling the ark of the covenant (16:4, 37), petitioning, giving thanks, and praising YHWH (1 Chron. 16:4; cf. 2 Chron. 5:13–14).

The noun *kōhēn*, “priest,” occurs more than seven hundred times in the First Testament. However, the verb *kihēn*, “to serve, act as priest,” is relatively rare.<sup>65</sup> While the root of both words involves mediation between divine and earthly realms, the usage of the verb is more restricted; and most references are associated with priestly office, including ordination to priestly service.<sup>66</sup>

Several additional expressions have liturgical implications. The phrases “to stand before” (*‘āmad lipnē*) YHWH and “to walk before” (*hithallēk/hālak lipnē*) YHWH, derive from the royal court.<sup>67</sup> A person who stood or walked “before the king” or “in the palace of the king” was authorized by the king to enter his presence and serve as his courtier (Dan. 1:4). One who stood/walked before YHWH had access to the divine court and was commissioned for service on his behalf.<sup>68</sup> The idiom “to follow/walk after [a god]” may denote fidelity to YHWH (1 Kings 14:8), but usually the expression bears the negative sense of following illegitimate deities,<sup>69</sup> as in Jeremiah 8:2:

And they will spread them [the bones of the people of Jerusalem] out to the sun, the moon, and to all the host of heaven, which they have loved [*‘āhab*], and which they have served [*‘abad*], and which they have gone after [*hālak ‘ahārē*], and which they have sought [*dāraś*], and to which they have prostrated themselves [*hištahāwā*].

While texts that speak of “walking after YHWH” are rare, the expression may speak generally of devotion to YHWH rather than liturgical service in

65. See, e.g., Exod. 28:1, 3–4, 41; 29:1, 44; 30:30; Lev. 7:35; 16:32; Num. 3:3–4; Deut. 10:6.

66. J. A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on the Image of Israel in Exodus 19.6*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series 395 (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 86–100. Ezekiel 44:13 narrows the expression to the performance of cultic rituals by the sons of Zadok. Hosea 4:6 alludes to the priestly task of teaching the Torah of God, a function that Mal. 2:1–9 treats in greater detail.

67. Variations of the idiom are used of Moses (Ps. 106:23), subsequent prophets (Deut. 18:5, 7; 1 Kings 17:1; 18:15; 2 Kings 3:14; 5:16; Jer. 15:1; 23:18, 22; cf. 18:20), Rechabites (Jer. 35:19), and in legal contexts (Jer. 7:10), but it is also applied to priests and Levites (Zech. 3:1; cf. Deut. 10:8; 18:7; 1 Kings 8:11). Psalms 134:1 and 135:2 speak simply of standing in YHWH’s house.

68. Persons so designated who served as agents of God include the patriarchs (Gen. 17:1; 24:40; 48:15), priests (1 Sam. 2:30), and kings: David (1 Kings 3:6; 8:25; 9:4; presumably also Ps. 56:13 [14]; 116:9), Solomon (1 Kings 9:4), and Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:3 = Isa. 38:3). The meaning of this expression differs significantly from “to walk with” (*hithallēk ‘et*) YHWH, which expresses more general piety: Enoch, Gen. 5:22, 24; Noah, Gen. 6:9; Levitical priests, Mal. 2:6.

69. Often with *‘abad*, “to serve,” and *hištahāwā*, “to prostrate [before]”: Deut. 8:19; Judg. 2:19; 2 Kings 23:3; 25:6; Jer. 13:10; 25:6. The idiom apparently derives from the practice of following statues of deities in religious procession.

particular.<sup>70</sup> Beyond these general expressions, the First Testament speaks of the full range of liturgical worship: prayer, singing, lamentation, fasting, and so forth.<sup>71</sup>

The New Testament is clear that Jesus' self-sacrificial ministry signaled the end of tabernacle and temple rituals. Nevertheless, it uses First Testament language of cultic service to speak of Christian worship. Corresponding to the Hebrew word *'abad*, we encounter *douleuō*, "to serve." Matthew 6:24 illustrates this general expression of vassalage/service: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will reject the one and be committed to the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." Elsewhere Paul speaks of the Thessalonians who turned from idols to serve the living and true God.<sup>72</sup> As heir to the First Testament and in the train of the LXX, the related noun *doulos*, "servant," is often used of devotees and servants of God in the New Testament.<sup>73</sup> Paul freely alternates *doulos*, "servant," and *apostolos*, "messenger, envoy," suggesting that *doulos* does not mean primarily "slave" or "bondslave" but functions as an honorific designation referring to "a specially appointed and commissioned agent" of God.<sup>74</sup> Yet the verb was also used more generally for all believers, who serve (*douleuō*) Christ daily with righteous actions and are committed to peace and the building up of the saints. Since we serve the Lord Christ, we will receive a reward from him (Col. 3:24) and the approval of others

70. See, e.g., Deut. 13:3–4 [4–5]; 1 Kings 14:8; 18:21; Jer. 2:2; Hosea 11:10; 2 Chron. 34:31. This idiom is distinct from expressions like "walking in YHWH's ways" (Deut. 28:9; 1 Kings 11:33, 38; 2 Kings 21:22; Pss. 81:13; 119:3; 128:1; Jer. 7:23)—as opposed to "walking in the way not good" (Isa. 65:2)—or "walking in his command/statutes/Torah/truth," which bear a pronounced ethical sense (2 Chron. 17:4; Jer. 32:23; 44:10; Ezek. 5:6, 7; 18:9, 17; 20:13, 21, 16; Pss. 26:3; 86:11; 119:1).

71. From the prophets alone: prayer (*tepillā*, see, e.g., Isa. 1:15; 37:4; 56:7; Jon. 2:7 [2:8]; Hab. 3:1), singing (*zimmēr*, Isa. 12:5; *šir*, Isa. 26:1; 30:29; 42:10; Jer. 20:13; Amos 5:23; 8:10), lamentation (*qinā*, Jer. 9:20; Ezek. 32:16; Amos 8:10), fasting (*šūm*, see, e.g., Isa. 58:3–5; Jer. 14:12; 36:6, 9; Jon. 3:5; Zech. 7:5; 8:19), sacrifices and offerings of all sorts (Isa. 1:11; 19:21), vows (*neder*, Isa. 19:21; Jon. 1:16; Mal. 1:14), festivals (*mō'ādīm*, Isa. 33:20; Ezek. 36:38; Hosea 2:11 [13]; Zech. 8:19), pilgrimages (*hag*, see, e.g., Isa. 30:29; Ezek. 45:17; 46:11; Hosea 2:11 [13]; 9:5), reading the word of YHWH (Jer. 36:6, 13–16), and teaching Torah (Mal. 2:6–8).

72. See 1 Thess. 1:9; cf. Acts 20:19; Rom. 7:6; 12:11. In Rom. 7:25 Paul says he serves the *nomos* (Torah) of God with his mind, while serving the *nomos* of sin with his flesh.

73. Moses the *doulos* of God (Rev. 15:3); prophets in general (10:7; 11:18; cf., e.g., 2 Kings 17:13, 23); apostles (Acts 4:29; 16:17); God-fearing people (cf. Luke 2:29; 1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:6; 1 Pet. 2:16; Rev. 1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6).

74. "Servant" of Christ and "apostle" are Paul's favorite official self-designations. For *doulos*, see Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; cf. Col. 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:24; James 1:1; Jude 1; Rev. 22:3. For *apostolos*, see Rom. 1:1; 11:13; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:1–2; 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1 (cf. 12:12); Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:1, 11; Titus 1:1. See also 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1.

(Rom. 14:17–18).<sup>75</sup> Remarkably *doulos* is never used specifically of cultic service; servitude to Christ involves a lifestyle totally devoted to him and is a precondition for acceptable liturgical worship.

This conclusion is reinforced by another verb, *latreuō*, which also means “to serve” but is linked more closely to carrying out religious and cultic duties.<sup>76</sup> In the Exodus narratives Moses repeatedly demands, “Let my people go that they may serve [LXX *latreuō*] me in the desert,”<sup>77</sup> but references to a feast (8:26) and sacrifices (10:25–26) also suggest cultic activity.<sup>78</sup> Often *latreuō* refers to righteous conduct of the people generally (Deut. 10:12), but the verb usually involves service to God by priests or Levites in the sanctuary. In the New Testament this word occasionally functions as a general expression for worship (including lifestyle, ethical conduct),<sup>79</sup> but it also refers to prayer (Luke 2:37) or unspecified actions in the presence of God.<sup>80</sup> In Acts 7:7 *latreuō* refers to cultic service of the people (feasts and sacrifices) in the desert, and in Acts 7:42 and Romans 1:25 it speaks of sacrificial ministry offered to God rather than to other gods.

In Romans 12:1 Paul captures perfectly the Mosaic vision of wholehearted and full-bodied worship:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [*sōmata*] as a living sacrifice, holy [*thysian zōsan hagian euareston*] and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable/logical service [*logikēn latreian*].

Translations that render *logikēn latreian* as “spiritual worship” (ESV, NRSV) or “your true and proper worship” (NIV) obscure the echo of Deuteronomy 10:12. Although this text has little to do with liturgical service, the LXX renders Hebrew *‘abad*, “to serve,” as *latreuō*. The translators of the Authorized Version (KJV) got Romans 12:1 right when they rendered *logikēn latreian* as “reasonable service,” provided that by “service” we mean full-bodied and wholehearted vassal-dom: all of life devoted to God, having been transformed

75. Christians are also called to serve earthly superiors well (Eph. 6:7) and to serve one another within the church (Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:22).

76. See H. Strathmann, in *TDNT* 4:58–65. Except for Num. 16:9 and Ezek. 20:32 (*šerēt*), Deut. 11:28 (*hālak ‘ahārē*), and the Aramaic of Daniel (*pēlah*)—of ninety occurrences in LXX, *latreuō* always translates *‘abad*, “to serve.” However, when *‘abad* is used in the general sense of “serving,” *douleō* is preferred.

77. See Exod. 4:23; 7:16; 8:1 [7:26 LXX], 20 [16]; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7, 8, 24, 26.

78. Remarkably, the LXX lends Deut. 10:12–13 and Josh. 24:19 a cultic nuance by using this term for *‘abad*.

79. See Matt. 4:10 = Luke 4:8, cf. Deut. 6:13; Luke 1:74; Acts 24:14; 27:23; Phil. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 9:14; 12:28.

80. As in Acts 26:7; Rev. 7:15; 22:3.

and renewed from the inside out, which is exactly what Paul develops in Romans 12–15. This is the logical and reasonable response to the redemption we have received through the cross (Rom. 1–11), even as Israel’s wholehearted and full-bodied vassalhood was the logical and reasonable response to YHWH’s magnificent acts of redemption (Deut. 4:32–40; 6:20–25).

The most explicit New Testament expression for cultic and ritual service rendered to God is *leitourgeō*, which underlies the English word “liturgy.”<sup>81</sup> In the New Testament this word group sometimes refers to general service,<sup>82</sup> but cognate nouns are also used of Zechariah’s priestly service in Luke 1:23 (*leitourgia*) and as a figure of speech in Romans 15:16 for a “minister” (*leitourgos*) of Christ Jesus who engages in the “priestly ministry” (*hierourgeō*) of the gospel. Steeped in the vocabulary of the First Testament cult, the author of Hebrews demonstrates that Jesus Christ’s onetime sacrifice for sins has ended the priestly service (*leitourgein*) and committed the ultimate “liturgical” act by which we are sanctified (Heb. 10:10–12). Likewise, he is our high priest, seated at the right hand of the throne of God, a minister (*leitourgos*) in the sanctuary, in the true tent that the Lord has set up (Heb. 8:1–2).

The term *hierourgeō*, “to act as priest,” appears in the New Testament only in Romans 15:16. A related form, *hierateuō*, “to minister as priest,” occurs in Luke 1:8, while verse 9 refers to the custom of the priestly office as *hierateia*. First Corinthians 9:13 speaks of “performing holy services of the temple” (*hieros*), and Titus 2:3 calls for older women to be reverent in their behavior—that is, act in a way befitting a holy person (*hieroprepēs*). Revelation 20:6 (cf. 1:6; 5:10) speaks of Christians as “priests of God” (*hiereis tou theou*), and Peter considers Christians “a holy priesthood” (*hieratouma hagion*, 1 Pet. 2:5) and “a priesthood of royal rank” (*basileion hierateuma*, 2:9). Revelation 5:10 sings of people from every tribe and nation being made a kingdom and priests (*hiereis*).<sup>83</sup>

The New Testament freely uses cultic expressions for the ministry that Christians perform for Christ, but unlike the First Testament, it hesitates to

81. The verb *leitourgeō*, “to minister,” occurs only three times in the New Testament (Acts 13:2; Rom. 15:27; Heb. 10:11); the noun *leitourgia*, “ministry, liturgy,” six times (Luke 1:23; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17, 30; Heb. 8:6; 9:21); *leitourgos*, the one who conducts the ministry, five times (Rom. 13:6; 15:16; Phil. 2:25; Heb. 1:7; 8:2); and *leitourgikos*, “ordained for ministry,” once (Heb. 1:14). For a full discussion, see Strathmann, in *TDNT* 4:215–31.

82. Acts 13:2; Rom. 13:6; Rom. 15:27; 2 Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:25, 30; Heb. 1:7, 14. The term appears over a hundred times in the LXX, usually for Hebrew *šerēt*, but when this word is not concerned with cultic matters, other terms may be used.

83. Elsewhere references to the priesthood usually apply either to the priests in Jewish cultic service or to Christ as high priest, who institutes a better priesthood and offers superior priestly service.

speak of corporate worship in cultic terms.<sup>84</sup> Paul speaks of himself being poured out as a liquid offering over the sacrifice and service of his readers' faith (*leitourgia tēs pisteōs*, Phil. 2:17), but the gathering of God's people for worship is never explicitly called a liturgical event.

### Synthesis: A Working Explanation of Worship for Our Time

How shall we synthesize this lexical material to formulate a biblical definition of worship for our time? A bewildering array of definitions has already been proposed in the ever-expanding literature on the topic.<sup>85</sup> The preceding discussion shows that neither the First nor the New Testament tried to capture the concept with a single word. We may characterize constituent parts of worship as mystery, celebration, life, dialogue, offering, or eschatological fulfillment, but to define biblical worship is to confine it. At best we may try to describe the phenomena.

Pagan worship focuses on corporate and individual cultic efforts seeking to mollify the gods<sup>86</sup> and secure their blessing. Today many Christians' understanding of worship differs little from that of pagans, except perhaps that God is singular and the forms of worship come from traditions more or less rooted in the Scriptures. Largely divorced from life, such worship represents a pattern of religious activities driven by a deep-seated sense of obligation to God and a concern to win his favor. But this understanding is unbiblical; it separates worship from daily life and compartmentalizes human existence into the sacred and the secular.

To account for the dimensions of worship reflected in the Scriptures, we need a much more comprehensive explanation. In simplest terms, worship is "the human response to God." However, to reflect the complexity of the biblical picture, I propose the following:

True worship involves reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accord with his will.

84. K. L. Schmidt (in *TDNT* 3:158) may be right in suggesting that focusing on the cult could easily lead to synergism.

85. See the list from Ron Man, *Worship Notes* 3/7 (July, 2008). <http://www.worr.org/images/File/3-7P&Wb.pdf>. F. M. Segler, (*Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship*, 2nd rev. ed. [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996], 7–11) says "worship" defies definition.

86. Described idiomatically as "to smooth, sweeten the face" (*hillā pānīm*) of the deity. For vestiges of this notion, see Exod. 32:11; 1 Sam. 13:12; 1 Kings 13:6; 2 Kings 13:4; 2 Chron. 33:12; Ps. 119:58; Jer. 26:19; Dan. 9:13; Zech. 7:2; 8:21–22; Mal. 1:9. The idiom is also used of mollifying humans: Job 11:19; Ps. 45:12 [13]; Prov. 19:6.

This is not so much a definition of worship as a description of the phenomena. While the following chapters will expound on this statement, I will lay the groundwork with some brief commentary.

First, the Scriptures call for worship that is true as opposed to false. Everyone worships. The problem is that not everyone worships truly. Those who direct their worship to gods other than the God revealed in Scripture or who worship the living God in ways contrary to his revealed will worship falsely. Whether we interpret obedience “before YHWH” in everyday conduct cultically or ethically (Deut. 6:25), to walk before him in truth/faithfulness (*be’emet*) with our whole heart/mind (*bēkol-lēbāb*) and being (*bēkol-nepes*, 1 Kings 2:4) demands integrity: consistency between confession and practice and consistency between what God seeks and what we present.

Second, true worship involves reverent awe. Evangelical worship today often lacks gravitas appropriate to the occasion and the divine Auditor who invites us to an audience with him. In Israelite worship, the concern for reverence was expressed through the design of the tabernacle and temple and by the priests’ attire, which was intended to promote dignity (*kābôd*) and royal beauty (*tip’eret*, Exod. 28:2, 40). True worship need not be humorless, but neither will it be casual or flippant.

Third, true worship is a *human* response. The Scriptures inform us that angelic creatures worship God by their words and by their actions as messengers of God and agents of providence (Isa. 6), and that the entire universe is involved in worshipful activity (Pss. 19:1–6; 50:6; 148). However, although Scripture envisions the ultimate restoration of fallen creation, its words are intended for human beings and primarily concern their relationship with God. In this book the concern is not how the rest of the universe glorifies God but how *we* worship God—how we respond to the Westminster Catechism’s declaration that “the chief end of *man* [humanity] is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Fourth, true worship involves action. It is not primarily interior, as if God is concerned only about what is in our hearts and disinterested in external ritual and ethical expressions. Although many aspects of God remain a mystery to us, biblical religion is not mystical, nor is it primarily cultic or formulaic. Some challenge us to treat “worship” as a verb,<sup>87</sup> which is fine, so long as we recognize that true worship involves actions that demonstrate covenant commitment to and love for God, and that our daily lives are characterized

87. See particularly Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Celebrating God’s Mighty Deeds of Salvation* (Nashville: Star Song, 2006). Webber’s concern is primarily the engagement of the congregation in liturgical gatherings.

by reverence and awe before him. As the prophets declare (1 Sam. 15:22; Mic. 6:8) and Jesus himself affirms (Matt. 23:23), obedience to the revealed ethical will of God must take priority over cultic ritual expression.

Fifth, true worship expresses the submission and homage of a person of lower rank before a superior. While the Scriptures speak of covenant arrangements between equals (Gen. 31:44–54), the relationship between God and his people is by definition asymmetrical. By grace, the Creator of the universe and the Redeemer of Israel invites us to covenant relationship, but this covenant is fundamentally monergistic (instituted by one party): God selects the covenant partner, establishes the terms, and determines the consequences of the vassals' response. True worship lets God be God on his terms, and we submit to him as Lord with reverent and trusting awe.

Sixth, while human subordinates may express their humility before human superiors by bowing and prostration, only the divine Sovereign is worthy of actual worship—assuming that we understand worship as veneration of the One who is the source and sustainer of all things and on whom we are absolutely dependent. This God has graciously revealed himself in the First Testament by name as YHWH and by actions as Creator and Redeemer. In the New Testament he has revealed himself primarily as the incarnate Son, but also as the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

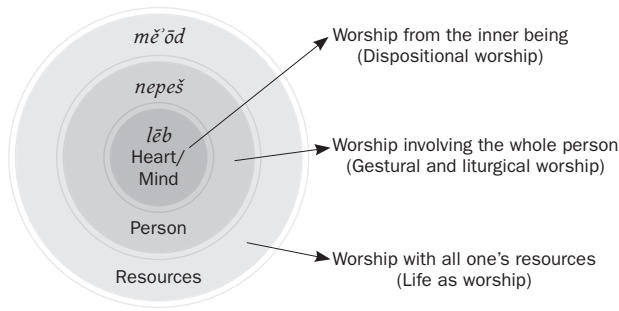
Seventh, true worship involves reactive communication. We could not worship God acceptably if he had not taken the initiative both to communicate with us and to open our eyes to his communication, whether in creation, history, or Scripture. The universe declares the transcendent qualities and glory of God in a general sense, but only through his specific revelation in deed and word do we learn of his specific character and attributes. True worship involves communication through action—demonstrating covenant commitment to God and our fellow human beings because he first loved us (Exod. 20:2; 1 John 4:19).

Eighth, for worshipers' acts of homage to be favorably received by God, they must align with his will rather than with the impulses of depraved human imagination. Forms of worship may vary from culture to culture, but true worship comes from hearts totally devoted to God and determined to please him. Scripture clearly reveals the forms of *ethical* worship acceptable to God, and since the New Testament gives minimal attention to corporate worship, true Christian worship should be grounded on theological principles established in the First Testament. Unless the New Testament expressly declares those principles to be obsolete, we should assume continuity.

In part, evangelical Christians quarrel over the nature of true worship, especially its cultic expression, because the New Testament hesitates to prescribe

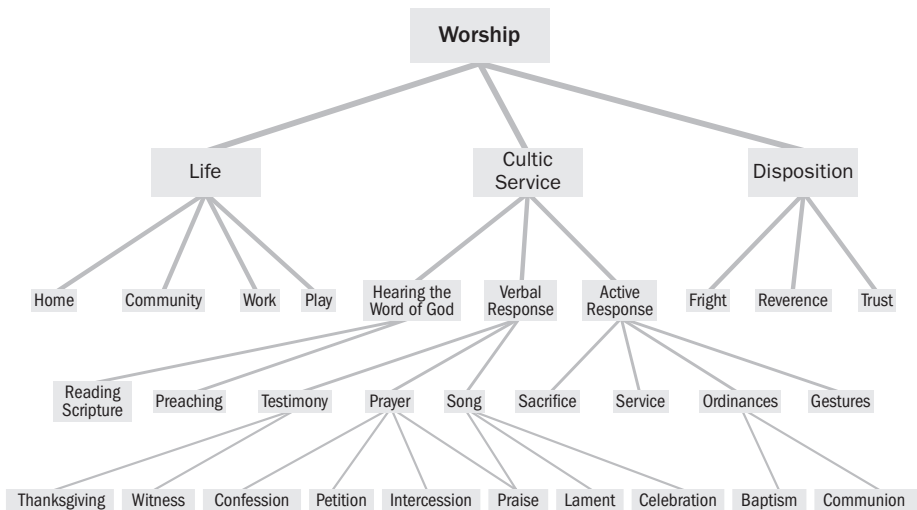
any liturgy when it describes the gatherings of Christians. In these assemblies, the emphasis seems to have been on edification and encouragement, serving one another, and challenging one another to faith and good works. While liturgical homage to God appears to be deemphasized, the First and New Testaments agree that all of life should be a service of worship. Adapting the second verse of the Shema (Deut. 6:5), we may represent true worship diagrammatically as in figure 1.3.

**FIGURE 1.3**  
**The Dimensions of Devotion**



This understanding of worship as being wholehearted and full-bodied is not a novel New Testament idea. It runs like a thread from Genesis 4 (the

**FIGURE 1.4**  
**The Dimensions of Biblical Worship**





worship of Cain and Abel) through Revelation 19 (the worship of those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb). Nor is cultic language absent from New Testament references to the gathering of God's people. Not only are Jesus' instructions for the Lord's Supper profoundly cultic but Hebrews 10:19–31 also calls on Christians to “draw near [to God] with a sincere heart” and admonishes them not to neglect participating in the assembly of God's people. Hebrews 12:28–29 reinforces the assumption of 10:26–31, that Christians' relationship to God closely resembles the Israelites' relationship to YHWH.

These summary talking points will all resurface in subsequent chapters; for now they declare our understanding of “true worship.” Worship is indeed a complex matter, encompassing all of life. The relationships among the various facets of worship are illustrated in figure 1.4.