

## Biblical terms for worship

### *Worship as homage or grateful submission to God*

The Hebrew verb most commonly translated ‘to worship’ is שָׁחָה *shachah*, which literally means ‘bend oneself over at the waist’. From earliest times, this term expressed the oriental custom of bowing down or casting oneself on the ground, kissing the feet, the hem of a garment or the ground, as a total bodily gesture of respect before a great one (\*e.g. Gen. 18:2; Exod. 18:7; 2 Sam. 14:4). Applied to the gods of paganism, it meant bending over or falling down before an image or making some literal gesture of homage to the god. At an early stage, it also came to be used for the inward attitude of homage or respect which the outward gesture represented.

In the OT, this gesture expressed surrender or submission to the living and true God. Sometimes it was an immediate and spontaneous reaction to a divine action or revelation, specifically motivated by awe and gratitude (\*e.g. Gen. 24:26–27, 52; Exod. 4:31; 34:8; Judg. 7:15). Bending over before the LORD, as a gesture of homage or grateful submission, also became associated with sacrifice and public praise in Israel. In such contexts, it could be a formal way of expressing devotion to or dependence on God (\*e.g. Deut. 26:1–11; Ps. 95:1–7; 1 Chr. 29:20–21; 2 Chr. 7:3–4; 29:28–30; Neh. 8:6). But the gesture was meaningful only if it expressed a recognition of God’s majesty and holiness and a desire to acknowledge him as king.

### *Worship as service to God*

Another biblical term often translated ‘to worship’ is the Hebrew עָבַד *‘abad*, which literally means ‘to serve’. The purpose of Israel’s redemption from slavery in Egypt was to release the people for exclusive service to the LORD (\*e.g. Exod. 3:12; 4:23; 8:1). When the parallel expressions ‘to sacrifice to the LORD’ (3:18; 5:3, 8, 17; 8:8, 25–29) and ‘to hold a festival’ (5:1) are used, it is clear that some form of ritual service is in view.

A complex system of sacrifices and rituals was instituted by God so that Israel could serve him appropriately at his chosen sanctuary. For example, the Passover was a ‘service’ to be observed in remembrance of the LORD’s saving work at the time of the Exodus (12:25–27; 13:5). But some passages set Israel’s service within the broader framework of fearing God, walking in all his ways, and observing all his commands and decrees. A total lifestyle of allegiance to God was clearly required of God’s people (\*e.g. Deut. 10:12–13; Josh. 22:5; 24:14–24). Consequently, bowing down and serving created things or other gods was strictly forbidden (\*e.g. Deut. 4:19, 28; 5:9; 7:4, 16) and provisions were made for removing every temptation to idolatry.

### *Worship as reverence or respect for God*

A final group of terms was used to indicate the fear, reverence or respect due to God is the Hebrew יָרֵא *yārē*. Such fear involved keeping his commandments (\*e.g. Deut. 5:29; 6:2, 24; Eccles. 12:13), obeying his voice (\*e.g. 1 Sam. 12:14; Hag. 1:12), walking in his ways (\*e.g. Deut. 8:6; 10:12; 2 Chr. 6:31), turning away from evil (\*e.g. Job. 1:1, 8; 2:3; 28:28; Prov. 3:7), and serving him (\*e.g. Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Josh. 24:14; Jonah 1:9). Sacrifice and other rituals were clearly a way of expressing reverence for God, but faithfulness and obedience to the covenant demands of God in every sphere of life were also the distinguishing marks of true religion (\*e.g. Exod. 18:21; Ps. 25:14; Mal. 3:16; 4:2).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. G. Peterson, “Worship,” ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 856–857.

## **Worshipping a holy God**

A term often used in the Old Testament to explain why God should be worshipped is the word 'holy'. In ordinary usage, to describe someone or something as 'holy' can often mean little more than 'religious'. But when the Old Testament describes Yahweh as 'holy' it is saying some very specific things about God's relationship with people.

### **God is infinite**

In the Old Testament story, God is best known to the people of Israel through the events of their history and of their own everyday life. Because of this, there are many graphic, and often intimate, insights into God's nature and personality. But this never meant that ordinary people could know everything about God. For example, when Job was trying to make sense out of his own frustrating life, he was forced to admit that in the last analysis there are hidden depths to God's workings that defy human understanding (Job 42:1–6). Aspects of God's character might well have been revealed clearly in events such as the exodus, but there are still other dimensions of God's being that remain deeply mysterious. Job was not the only one to feel this way, for both poets (Psalm 139:6) and prophets (Isaiah 40:13–14) knew that God was different from people. In earlier chapters we have repeatedly noticed how God's apparent 'hiddenness' was a major part of Israel's experience on both a personal and a national level. This feeling of perplexity and wonder in the face of an awe-inspiring divine presence is, of course, common to religious people the world over. So, also, is the use of the word 'holy' to describe the difference between God and people. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word translated 'holy' is not certain, though many scholars believe it is linguistically related to a word that means 'to divide'. When people describe the gods they worship as 'holy', they often think of the universe being divided into two quite different modes of existence. There is the place where God belongs, and people, things and events connected with that can be called 'holy'. Then there is also the world where human beings operate, and that is 'profane' or 'common'. In this context, the words 'holy' and 'profane' do not indicate moral judgments, nor for that matter is there necessarily a spatial implication, as if God literally exists in some other place than people. These expressions are simply terms used to convey the fact that God and people are not the same. The Old Testament shares this widely held view with other nations of both the ancient and the modern world (Leviticus 10:10).

Within this frame of reference, one aim of worship is to enable these two domains to meet and relate to each other. Even apparently 'common' things can be made 'holy'—places, times, people and objects. But once they have been set apart to God in this way, special care must be taken by 'common' people in dealing with them. 'Holiness' is often spoken of in the Old Testament as if it were a great power or invisible forcefield, emanating from the very person of God. It is not easy for modern people in a technological society to understand this way of thinking. But a parallel might be found in our own respect for the contents of the core of a nuclear reactor. Though most of us do not understand its workings, we all know that at the centre of the process are materials emitting out invisible rays of energy that, if not properly contained and controlled by those competent to deal with them, could be disastrous for us all. The Old Testament often uses similar sorts of imagery to describe God's holy presence. When God's will was revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai, God's communication was accompanied by an awesome sense of divine presence that ordinary people needed to avoid. The place became so saturated with this divine power ('holiness') that only specially equipped people were able to cope with it (Exodus 19:9–25). Ordinary people such as Moses could readily be set aside and made holy themselves, but if they came into contact with such holiness before that the results could be catastrophic. The Philistines later learned this to their cost when they tried to meddle with the ark of the covenant (1 Samuel 5:1–6:19). But even Israelites could suffer the same fate when they as 'common' persons came into contact with the 'holiness' of the divine presence (2 Samuel 6:1–8). God's majesty and power must be respected, and to call God 'holy' is one way of emphasizing that. Though there is some considerable emphasis on the fact that God can be known in a direct and personal way by ordinary mortals, God is still different, and to be esteemed and treated with due reverence (Exodus 15:11; Job 11:7–12; Psalm 139:6–12).

### **God is good**

Many religious people think of their gods only in terms of awe-inspiring power. But Israel's covenant faith led to a distinctive and more carefully nuanced understanding of what it means to be holy. In the wider world of religions, the mysterious, numinous, all-powerful kind of holiness has often been advanced as an

explanation for the irrational and capricious actions of the gods. But the events of Israel's history had shown that the God of the Old Testament was faithful and trustworthy, not fickle and unpredictable. In the light of that, God's holiness was a way of behaving, as well as a state of being. To say that God is holy also implies that God is good, and since people do not always manage to live by God's standards, it can imply a confession of human failure (Isaiah 55:8).

These two aspects of God's holiness—the numinous and the ethical—are brought together most clearly in the description of the call of the prophet Isaiah as he went to the Temple to worship (Isaiah 6:1–7). By definition, what went on in the Temple was holy in the numinous sense, for the Temple was a holy place, set apart for God's own use, and only those who were ritually holy themselves were able to cope with it. As the prophet stood there with the other worshippers, he had an awe-inspiring experience of God's greatness and power—but in response to this revelation, he at once recognized that a state of ritual cleanness was not enough by itself to equip him for God's presence. God's majestic holiness and moral goodness could not easily be separated from each other, and Isaiah instantly knew that he was unfit to encounter God because of his own sinfulness. This recognition was one of the greatest insights of the Old Testament prophets. In traditional Canaanite spirituality it was widely assumed that divine holiness had only a cultic, numinous dimension, and that people could be made fit to deal with the gods by means of appropriate rituals. The people of Israel were constantly tempted to think the same way, but the prophets insisted that they were wrong and that God was concerned with everyday behaviour, not just with ritual at the shrine (Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:6–8). Personal and social wrongdoing were incompatible with true worship.

The prophets were not the only ones who saw wrongdoing as a barrier to acceptance by God. The writers and editors of the law codes made the same connection between morals and worship, and the very words that worshippers used in the Temple itself often reminded them of precisely the same fact: 'Who has the right to go up Yahweh's hill? Who may enter God's holy Temple? Those who are pure in act and in thought' (Psalm 24:3–4).

### **God is love**

For Isaiah, the painful awareness of God's moral holiness was inextricably linked to his own need for forgiveness (Isaiah 6:5). A way had to be found by which the sinful prophet could be made fit for the presence of such a holy God. In numinous terms, a person could be empowered to deal with holiness by undergoing the required ritual procedures. But how could moral reformation be brought about? Like others both before and after him, Isaiah knew only too well that human effort, while not insignificant, was unlikely to be able to achieve this ultimate transformation by itself, and if he was to be morally right with God, this was something that only God would be able to accomplish. So the means of Isaiah's spiritual reconciliation comes from God, carried directly from the altar, and through this symbolic act he is told 'your guilt is gone, and your sins are forgiven' (Isaiah 6:7). The book of Isaiah frequently calls God 'the holy one' precisely because God forgives wrongdoing and brings salvation to the lives of the people. God is almighty and infinite, as well as morally perfect, but God also cares for ordinary, struggling people. To describe God as 'holy' not only defines God's awesome power, but also implies God's perfect love. At the same time as God's holy presence highlights human failure, it provides the means whereby wrongdoing can be forgiven and new life can be born: 'I am the high and holy God, who lives for ever. I live in a high and holy place, but I also live with people who are humble and repentant, so that I can restore their confidence and hope' (Isaiah 57:15).

This is the background against which Old Testament worship needs to be understood. Sincere worship reflects the response of God's people to the revelation of God's nature, and the nature of God's holiness in turn determines the character of the human response. Because God is almighty, true worship must always respect the barriers between the sacred and the secular, the holy and the profane. Because God is good, true worship must honestly face up to the reality of human wrongdoing. But because God is love, the repentant worshipper can always look for God's forgiveness and anticipate the promise of a renewed life. The precise way in which these themes are related to each other varies from one occasion of worship to another. But all worship begins from the recognition that God is holy and people are not. It is a celebration of the many ways in which they can be made fit for God's presence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John William Drane, [\*Introducing the Old Testament\*](#), Completely rev. and updated. (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 2000), 306–309.