

## The Biblical Concept of Worship

Using Plato's Mantle (available elsewhere on this website) we can suggest a *continuity of being* between the objective quadrants. Particulars "partake of," or are "characterized by," the essential qualities found in the abstract realm. We see particulars *exhibit* essences. This fact requires great care in discussion, but few examples from the Bible better illustrate this supposition than the notion of worship.

We have come to expect the abstract *notion of love* (as in "love your neighbor") to be made visible by such *behavior as benevolence*. We are told to *show* the world our *love* one toward another (1 John 3:11,23; 4:7,11). There is to be a "continuity of being" from the abstract *notion* of love to its *visible manifestation* in our behavior.

But several things can go wrong at this point. A particular may *mimic* the behavior of one abstract quality, but really be the manifestation of another. Giving alms in a noisy, flashy way may *seem* to be love for the poor, but really might be nothing more than egotism and self-aggrandizement (Matthew 6:2,5). Another possibility is not recognizing the abstract character of the behavior. Jesus taught that the essential feature of murder is not death, but anger; not of pulling the trigger, but of wanting to; He taught that the essential character of fornication is less sexual than lustful, not love but appetite.

When we come to the notion of worship, we have a very simple task. In determining the nature of what the Bible considers worship, we have very little diversity of vocabulary with which to deal. The Old Testament word for worship is almost entirely a translation of שָׁחָה *bow down deeply, do obeisance* as used in phrases such as *to bow down to the ground* Genesis 18:2; *to bow down toward*; Psalm 58. "Bow down" in profane usage includes the beggar, before a superior; 1 Samuel 2:36, and the suppliant; Genesis 33:7. Metaphorically. It is used of other peoples before Israel; Gn 27:29. In cultic usage it indicates worship of the constellations; Deuteronomy 4:19, and bowing down in the direction of the holy mountain; Ps 99:9.

The Lexicon of Brown-Driver-Briggs gives the following definition: שָׁחָה **vb.** bow down — **Qal** *Imv.* fs. שָׁחָה *bow down*. **Hiph.** *Impf.* fig., anxiety depresses **1.** bow down, prostrate oneself, before a monarch or superior, in homage, etc.: **a.** c. ל, after descriptive cl. (esp. with קָדַר, נָפַל **2.** before God, in worship, etc., before an angel in theophany. **3.** before other gods.

This word occurs 54 times in the O.T. in the present tense, which generally gives only a *prescriptive* sense. It is used another 40 times in the "past tense," which gives a *descriptive* sense, i.e., when it states the actual behavior of someone said to be worshipping. In the first case the command to worship, or the intention to worship is indicated. In the latter case, the actual behavior of worship is described. The word means "bow down," and is translated that way in Young's Literal Translation. The major English translations sometimes give "bow down" instead of "worship," and on a few occasions, both are given together.

Good examples are Genesis 24:26 "bowed his head in worship," Genesis 24:48 "Bow down my head in worship," and Genesis 24:52 where the King James has "worship," but other versions have "bowed himself down to the earth." Most English translations of 1st Samuel 15:31 have "worshiped," where the ESV has "bowed before." First Kings 9:9 joins *worship* with *serve* in the phrase "worshiped and served." And in Psalm 5:7 we read "I will worship toward thy holy temple," which certainly would be better rendered "bow down toward." All of this suggests a posture in which the corresponding frame of mind is physically demonstrated. There appears to be one exception, Exodus 33:10, where each man "stood up in his tent door, and worshiped." Only the

New Revised Standard Version gets this verse right, with the seemingly awkward “the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent.” That is, the people would arise within their own tents, make their way to the door, and bow down [worship].

The vocabulary and word pictures of Daniel make it even plainer. In Daniel a different word is used and occurs 10 times. נָפַל is the usual word for “fall,” and is used of all sorts of falling, both literal and figurative. It is often followed by the word “do obeisance” סָגַד. The idea presented is an almost violent *throwing oneself down*, followed by whatever other *act of homage* might have been current in Babylon at that time. It is so plain that the very act of falling down before an idol is equated with “serving” the idol. But what else can one do for an idol? The occurrences are as follows:

סָגַד . . . . נָפַל (Daniel 2:46) fall down . . . and do obeisance.

וְתִסְגְּדוּן . . . תִּפְּלוּן (Daniel 3:5) fall down . . and do obeisance.

סָגַדוּן . . . נָפְּלוּן (Daniel 3:7) fall down . . and do obeisance.

וְיִסְגְּדוּ . . . יִפְּלוּ (Daniel 3:10) fall down . . and do obeisance.

סָגַדוּן . . . פָּלְחוּן (Daniel 3:12) [not] falling down or making obeisance.

סָגַדוּן . . . פָּלְחוּן (Daniel 3:14) [not] falling down (serving) or making obeisance.

וְתִסְגְּדוּן . . . תִּפְּלוּן וְתִסְגְּדוּן (Daniel 3:15) fall down and do obeisance . . [not] do obeisance.

פָּלְחוּן (Daniel 3:18) fall down (serve).

וְלֹא־יִפְּלוּ וְלֹא־יִסְגְּדוּן (Daniel 3:28) [not] fall down (serve) and not do obeisance.

From these cases it becomes plain that worship is a somber affair of self abasement. The notion implied in prostration is that of *self abasing submission before a superior*. When used before friends, relatives, or strangers, *it is self abasement that suggests that the “worshiper” is “at your service.”* Worship, in either case is *the humbling act that precedes and suggests the willingness to be of service*. The act of worship is essentially that of humble submission. Before God, such worship, (whether bowing, kneeling, or merely standing with bowed head) is to make visible and be *characterized by the essential feature of humility and accessibility*. Old Testament worship was not a fun time; there was no dancing, no singing, and no absent mindedness. *Worship was a closely focused statement of humility, inferiority, and a willingness to serve*. It was the epitome of *subservience*.

Even the closely related English near synonym *obeisance*, is instructive in this respect. It denotes the use of a bodily movement or posture to indicate respect, homage, adoration, reverence, veneration, honor, submission, or deference, as in “he made a very formal, elaborate gesture of obeisance.”

In the New Testament we have the word προσκυνέω, meaning *(fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully* depending on the object; **1.** to human beings Matthew 18:26; Acts 10:25; Revelation 3:9. **2.** to God Matthew 4:10; John 4:20f, 23f; 12:20; Acts 24:11; 1 Corinthians 14:25; Hebrews 11:21; Revelation 4:10; 14:7; 19:4. **3.** to foreign deities Acts 7:43. **4.** to the Devil and Satanic beings Matthew 4:9; Lk 4:7; Revelation 9:20; 13:4; 14:9, 11. **5.** to angels Revelation 22:8. **6.** to Christ Matthew 2:2, 8, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 20:20; 15:25; 28:9, 17; Mark 5:6; 15:19; Lk 24:52. [Gingrich] Here we see that the Greek of the New Testament has the same basic meaning as the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

So worship, as the Bible presents it, is the *attitude* denoted by an accepted *behavior*, a *demonstration* of an *essential idea* advanced by a common *posture*. The *behavior* of bowing down is the *demonstration* of the *abstract notion* of subservience and willing servitude. In the Bible, worship is bowing down, and bowing down is worship. As *per* other notions, the *abstract character* of what is demonstrated *is its essence*. Just as self-sacrifice is the *behavior* whose *essence* is love, kneeling or bowing face to the ground is the behavior or demonstration of the essence of worship. Bowing was the behavior of worship. Worship did not require the utterance of the single word. Worship was not verbal, but physical. When verbalization did occur in the context of worship, it mirrored the posture and verbally expressed the essence of worship, i.e., subservience and the willingness to serve.

A warning is necessary at this point. The New Testament, especially Jesus, differentiated sharply between the *matter of the heart* and the *matter of mere appearance*. His Sermon on the Mount did not so much *redefine* things like murder, adultery and so forth, as *sharpen the focus on the inner workings of the heart*. Should we desire to follow suit in the case of worship, we must be sure that we *focus* on the spiritual nature of worship, not *redefine it*. If people do not want to kneel, that may reveal that they do not want to worship. But for those who do want to worship, the real, spiritual, inner aspect of the heart may not be dispensed with. If we wish to divest the notion of worship from its traditional physical posture, or “get to the heart of the matter,” we may only do so *by meticulously preserving its essence*. This is nonnegotiable. We may not throw the baby of *humility, reverence and subservience* out with the bath water of *physically bowing down*. If we throw away *both the outward sign and the inner essence*, what do we have left except pretense? We then have only an empty word, stripped of its meaning and capable of being defined as anyone chooses. You have what Francis Schaeffer called a “banner word.” It is like children who do not want to play rough or get dirty, and who do not know how to handle a ball, but who instead sit and color, calling this activity “playing football.” Ridiculous? No more so than what many today call “worship.”