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The Hebrew Root of Worship

Worship.

A word that almost every person who has spent time in some sort of religion, is likely very familiar with. It’s used all over the Scriptures as well.

Genesis 22:5 (ESV)

Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”

In modern society, the word “worship” has come to have a variety of meanings and is often associated with singing certain types of songs, certain dances, specific music, and other such things. Many times the music we associate with worship evokes emotions that let us feel like we are connecting with YHWH. However, is that what worship is, biblically speaking? Does worship have to do with how we are feeling or the songs we sing?

Let’s take a look.

WHAT IS “WORSHIP”...BIBLICALLY?

Just as Inigo points out to Vizzini in *The Princess Bride* about the word, “inconceivable”, it’s possible that the word “worship” doesn’t mean what we think it means.

In Hebrew, Shachah is the word used for worship. It carries the following meanings:

H7812 - shâchâh or shahhah

A primitive root; to depress, that is, prostrate. That’s according to Strong’s Concordance.

Brown-Driver-Briggs defines it as meaning “to bow down” and even more specifically to bow down or prostrate oneself out of honor or respect toward someone or something deemed superior to oneself. The superior can be a deity, a man, or even an idol.

Other English words used in the KJV as a translation of shachah includes:

obeisance (Exodus 18:7)

bowed (Genesis 23:7)

reverenced (Esther 3:2)

crouched (1 Samuel 2:36)

Notice what was missing? There is nothing relating to how one *feels* about the object or person that the “worship” is being directed at. It is simply putting oneself low in relation to another, often as a sign of respect. This is evidenced repeatedly in Scripture; it’s the same word used whether the object being “worshipped” is YHWH or man.

We aren’t the only ones to have this understanding.

According to the Ancient Hebrew Research Center the word for worship is misunderstood in Scripture today, because it’s not often understood from the necessary ancient Hebrew perspective. The same word, Shachah that we’ve been discussing is used to both mean worship the Creator and to bow down or make obeisance. (Ancient Hebrew Research Center - <http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/emagazine/013.html>)

Here’s what they said:

Whenever the Hebrew word "shahhah" is used as an action toward God, the translators translate this word as "worship". But, whenever this same Hebrew word is used as an action toward another man, the translators translate this word as "obeisance", "to bow" or "bow down". As you can see, the translators are preventing the reader from viewing the text in its proper Hebraic context. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word "shahhah" can be seen in Numbers 22:31 - "and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face". "shahhah" means to bow down with the face to the ground.

The concept of "worship" as defined by Webster’s dictionary is not Hebraic in any way and is not found in the Bible. We would be better off to remove the idea of "worship" from our Biblical vocabulary and replace it with "bow down". The only true way to bow down/worship God or a man from a true Hebraic perspective is to bow down with the face to the ground. Of course, this concept of bowing is an eastern custom that is not practiced in our western culture.

We find the same meanings when we look at the Greek word used in both the Septuagint and in the Brit Hadasha (or New Testament) as well.

G4352 proskuneō

Proskuneo carries a meaning of:

to make obeisance (LSJ Glossary)

Worship, go down on knees (Dodson)

To fawn or crouch to, prostrate oneself or do reverence to in homage (Strong’s)

To kiss the hand, fall upon knees, or pay homage to one of superior rank (Thayer’s)

Once again we see the act of worship is of putting oneself below another out of honor or respect to another. What we don’t see is the most commonly understood definitions found today in the Merriam-Webster dictionary which defines worship as:

1. the act of showing respect and love for a god especially by praying with other people who believe in

the same god : the act of worshipping God or a god

2. excessive admiration for someone

3. chiefly British : a person of importance —used as a title for various officials (as magistrates and some mayors)

4. reverence offered a divine being or supernatural power; also : an act of expressing such reverence

5. a form of religious practice with its creed and ritual

6. extravagant respect or admiration for or devotion to an object of esteem <worship of the dollar>

Of the six definitions offered, only the 4th one would include the biblical, Hebraic understanding of the term, but even then it only relates it to a divine being completely disregarding its use towards a person. The second meaning kind of relates to the person but biblically, it doesn't have to be an "excessive admiration".

As we've discussed in other teachings, we need to make sure that we are following the meaning of the words within the context of which they would have been understood by the speaker and intended audience. The modern understanding of words is not always the same as those in ancient times.

The Hebraic understanding according to the context and culture appears to be that worshipping is making oneself low, or bowing before another with some reverence.

"WORSHIP" TODAY

As mentioned earlier, it's not uncommon to consider the singing of certain types of songs at church, home, or in the vehicle and often with arms raised, to be worship. Shouting out to YHWH or singing up-tempo songs are most often what is considered to be praise. However, what we have found is that while we certainly find singing and dancing in Scripture, we don't see where it's necessarily a form of worship. The majority of instances where singing and dancing is mentioned in Scripture is in conjunction with giving praise, not worship.

The two words most common Hebrew words translated as "praise" in the Old Testament are "halal" (H1984) and "yadah" (H3034). Halal has several different meanings based upon the context. It can mean brilliant in tone or color, brightness of light, to boast and be grandiose, to be foolish or mad (as in crazy). However, it also can mean to sing, to glorify or simply to praise and relates to celebrating. Yadah is most often used to mean to confess or give thanks, but is also used as "praise".

Remember, worship is about making oneself low; humbling oneself before another. When we praise someone or something, we are heaping praises upon them, giving glory to them or esteeming them. Some may even say we're lifting the object of our praise up, but find that definition isn't always true; more on that in a minute.

Because of the understanding that praise is lifting someone up, it is believed by some that the results are the same as worship, whether we are making ourselves low or lifting something above us; in both cases we are below it. However, the Father is the Most High. Can we lift up the Most High to an even more elevated position? No we can't; He is already the Most High, we cannot elevate Him any further. That's

why saying that praise is lifting another up just can't work across the board. We can say, however, that lifting one up is a form of praise.

Let's say you make the winning shot in a basketball game. Your teammates lift you up on their shoulders. They heap praises on you! They are giving you esteem, or glorifying you. They are not bowing down before you or making themselves lower, which would be worship. They are literally lifting you up; starting as equals they then elevate you.

Now let's say you're going before a king, THE King. What do you do? Do you hoist him on your shoulders and tell him how great he is and how he's done so many good things?

Well...you could, but that wouldn't be the most appropriate way to enter into the presence of the King, would it?

At the very least, you'd probably bow; in some cases you may kneel, and sometimes you might even lay prostrate on the floor. Why would you do this? To show respect; to acknowledge his position or authority.

Are you seeing the difference between giving praise and worship? How giving one esteem or lifting them up is actually quite different than making yourself low?

If you come before The King and you do not bow, kneel, or make any other sign of obeisance or even respect, what message are you sending?

You're saying that you will not bow; you're saying that you are equal to or better than The King. You're displaying arrogance, not humility. Arrogance has no place where worship is concerned. You cannot worship and be arrogant toward the object you're supposed to be showing deference to, not really.

Praise and worship are both important; there is a time and a place for both. However, the attitude and approach is not the same.

Praise is a good thing, so please don't misunderstand us. While we cannot lift the Father up any higher, we can and should give him praise.

Psalms 100:4 (ESV)

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!

So, with that being said, what is often considered "worship" today is not truly "worship" as defined or exemplified in Scripture. In fact, it's really a form of praise, we'll cover that topic more in depth in a later teaching.

THE SPIRITUAL APPLICATION OF WORSHIP

We've said many times that the physical actions teach us a spiritual truth, just as a spiritual lesson can also teach us something in its physical (or literal) application. The physical act of bowing or prostrating

oneself before another is the obvious physical teaching here.

So what's the spiritual application?

The spiritual aspect would be our choosing to put ourselves under the authority of the Creator, having a desire to follow Him. Put plainly, it is the willingness to be obedient to YHWH, to His instructions, His Torah. Remember, the Law of God is Spiritual according to Paul in Romans 7:14. Our desire to obey or disobey comes through our spirit. For more on what "spirit" is, please see our teaching [The Hebrew Root of Spirit](#).

Our desire to follow the Law of God, the Torah, is the spiritual action of worshipping Him. Choosing to be obedient to YHWH is how we can worship in spirit and truth. Thus, when we kneel or lay prostrate before our Creator, we are performing an act of worship, biblically speaking.

Just to be clear, worship is the giving of honor and respect to someone or something else as being greater than yourself. The physical acts of worship are more obvious such as kneeling, bowing, kissing the hand of someone, etc. However, spiritual worship may not be quite so obvious as it isn't limited only to physical acts.

Spiritual worship can be any act upon which you put yourself below someone or something. For this reason, it's especially important to be careful what we worship, as it doesn't take much for us to make something an idol. For more on the second commandment, please see our teaching titled: [The 2nd Commandment: The Truth in Context](#).

Abraham was performing a spiritual act of worship when he took Isaac to be sacrificed in obedience to the Creator's command (Genesis 22:5), Messiah worshipped as he knelt and prayed in the Garden and submitted His will to that of the Father (Matthew 26:39). The prophet Daniel worshipped as he knelt before YHWH and prayed (Daniel 6:10).

IS IT OKAY TO WORSHIP MEN?

With our new biblical understanding of worship, the question may be asked, "Are you saying it's now okay to worship men, like your king example?"

To answer that question let's again look to Scripture to see what was lived out by the Creator's people. In addition to worshipping the Creator and false gods, we do see men are "worshipped" at times.

Genesis 18:2 (ESV)

He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and **bowed** (shachah) himself to the earth

Genesis 23:7 (ESV)

Abraham rose and bowed (shachah) to the Hittites, the people of the land.

Genesis 27:29 (ESV)

Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow (shachah) down (shachah) to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow (shachah) down (shachah) to you.

Cursed be everyone who curses you,
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”

Ruth 2:10 (ESV)

Then she fell on her face, bowing (shachah) to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?”

1 Samuel 20:41 (ESV)

And as soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and fell on his face to the ground and bowed (shachah) three times. And they kissed one another and wept with one another, David weeping the most.

Isaiah 49:23 (ESV)

Kings shall be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.
With their faces to the ground they shall bow (shachah) down (shachah) to you,
and lick the dust of your feet.
Then you will know that I am the Lord;
those who wait for me shall not be put to shame.”

Hebrews 11:21 (ESV)

By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing (proskuneo) in worship over the head of his staff.

Revelation 3:9 (ESV)

Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow (proskuneo) down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

In all of these cases the same word is used to worship the Creator, to worship false gods, or to show respect and honor to another man. Remember the definition of worship is putting oneself low in relation to another, often in Scripture evidenced by a bow.

An act of worship is not always a bad thing, sometimes it is simply an act of showing respect. Even today we see this happen in some culture such as several Asian ones. They bow to one another as a sign of respect, not because they are viewing the other as some sort of god and therefore would be guilty of idol worship, breaking the Torah.

There is a time and place for everything. Sometimes an act of “worship” is simply a sign of respect toward a person.

CONCLUSION

In modern times worship is considered to be something done only to the Creator, and is often accompanied by music, singing and dancing, raising your arms, etc. Some may argue and say that worship does include singing songs, or dancing before the Lord among other things. We would look to the Scripture and disagree. We understand such actions to be that of praise, not worship. It’s not uncommon for it to be understood that slower songs are worship and faster, happier songs are praise. We would suggest that it doesn’t matter if the song is fast or slow, somber or bright, it is all to bring praise to the Creator.

Praise is when we lift someone or something up, worship is when we make ourselves low.

There is a time to praise, we are to enter His courts with praise.

Psalms 100:4 (ESV)

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!

However, our lives are to be lives of worship; how do we do this? Through our obedience to Him; following His words, His instructions. By putting His will above our own, we are worshipping our Creator. This sentiment was echoed by Paul when he said whatever we do, we should do unto YHWH (Colossians 3, Ephesians 6).

So, do you want to worship your Creator in spirit and truth? Then do so by living your life submitted to His ways and His Word. Do you want to show additional adoration of Him and all He has done? Fall on your knees before the Mighty One of Israel, bow your head and worship your Creator through your prayers. Live your life dedicated to the Creator and know you will be worshipping Him the way He intended.

We hope that this teaching has blessed you.

*Remember, continue to test everything.
Shalom!*

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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