Theological Foundations of Worship

Biblical, Systematic, and Practical Perspectives

Edited by Khalia J. Williams and Mark A. Lamport
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Introductions by
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This first volume of the series Worship Foundations offers essays on the theological foundations of worship; the next volume offers essays on the various historical traditions of worship. In each case, it is Christian communal worship of God that the writers have in mind. In this introduction to the first book in the series, let us reflect on the practice itself, Christian communal worship of God, and conclude by asking, Who are the agents of such worship? A continuation of this introduction will appear in the next volume of the series.

In what follows, I employ a term that almost all writers on these matters use: “liturgy.” In the introduction to the second volume, I will discuss, in some detail, just what it is that we are referring to when we speak of “liturgy.” But I judge that no confusion or obscurity will result from using the term while postponing that discussion. A worship service is an enactment of a liturgy. And the agents in a worship service are liturgical agents.

What Are We Doing When We Worship God?

What is worship? My Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (11th ed.) tells me that our word “worship” comes from the Middle English “worship,” meaning “reverence paid to a divine being.” It says that the Middle English “worship” comes, in turn, from the Old English “weorthscipe,”
which is a combination of the term “weorth,” meaning worth or worthy, with the suffix “-scipe,” which means the state of something. The term “worship” in present-day English remains true to its etymological origins: to worship God is to pay reverence to God for God’s worth. It is a mode of acknowledging God’s worthiness: the excellence of who God is and the greatness of what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. In Christian worship, we acknowledge the distinctive and unsurpassable excellence of God.

There are other ways of acknowledging God’s distinctive excellence—for example, by obeying God’s injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves and by participating in God’s cause of bringing about justice. But these ways of acknowledging God’s excellence are not worship of God. Why not? What is distinctive of worship as a mode of acknowledging God’s excellence?

What is fundamentally distinctive, I would say, is the orientation that characterizes worship. In our everyday lives we are oriented toward our tasks, toward our fellow human beings, toward what they do and make, toward the natural world. In worshiping God, we turn around and orient ourselves toward God. We turn away from attending to the heavenly bodies, away from attending to our neighbor, and so forth, in order to attend directly to God. We face God. In worship, our acknowledgment of God’s excellence is Godward in its orientation.

We are close to identifying the species of acknowledging God’s excellence that is worship of God, but we are not quite there yet. What’s missing, I would say, is what I will call a certain attitudinal stance toward God. In the absence of that distinct attitudinal stance, Godward acknowledgment of God’s distinctive excellence is not yet worship of God.

By the term “attitudinal stance,” I do not mean a feeling or emotion. The stance may include a feeling or emotion, but it is not to be identified with either of those. An attitudinal stance toward someone is a way of regarding that person. Regarding someone with admiration is an example of an attitudinal stance toward that person; regarding someone with disdain is another example.

The English term “adoration” seems to me to best capture the attitudinal stance of the worshiper toward God; our worship of God is our adoration of God. To adore something is to be drawn to it on account of its worth, to be gripped by it for its excellence. We speak of adoring some person, some work of art, some scene in nature.

Adoration has different content depending on the object of adoration and on how the adoring person understands that object; adoration of a painting by Vincent van Gogh is different in its content from, say, adoration of some
mathematical proof. So let us dig inside the Christian adoration of God so as to identify some of its content.

Our adoration of God, for God’s distinctive and unsurpassable excellence, incorporates being in awe of God for God’s excellence. In the Orthodox liturgy, after the bread and wine have been brought into the sanctuary and the Eucharist proper is about to begin, the priest says, “Let us stand reverently; let us stand in awe.”

The content of our adoration of God includes more than awe, however. One can be in awe of something without worshiping it. The destruction wreaked by a tornado evokes awe but not adoration. In our adoration of God, what more is there than awe?

My dictionary’s description of the etymology of our word “worship” suggests that beyond awe there is reverence. “In reverence, let us stand before the Lord.” Reverence is not the same as awe; nobody reveres the awesome power of a tornado.

Without now making any claim to exhaustiveness, I suggest that the adoration definitive of Christian worship has yet a third component: gratitude. One would need to be dull indeed not to notice the prominence of gratitude to God in Christian worship.

Let me pull things together. I suggest that Christian worship of God is a specific mode of Godward acknowledgment of God’s distinctive and unsurpassable excellence. Specifically, it is that mode of such acknowledgment whose attitudinal stance toward God is awed, reverential, and grateful adoration. Christians do not assemble and engage in ritual actions to placate God, they do not assemble to keep themselves in God’s good graces, they do not assemble to keep their ledgers on the positive side—or if they do assemble for such reasons, what they are doing is profoundly wrong. They assemble to worship God. Facing God, they acknowledge God’s distinctive and unsurpassable greatness in a stance of awed, reverential, and grateful adoration.

No one presently writing about Christian worship would say that Christians assemble to placate God, to keep themselves in God’s good graces, to keep their ledgers on the positive side, or anything else of the sort. What one does find is that a good many writers, instead of focusing on the thing itself—namely, worship of God—focus instead on one or another function of worship. Some focus on the formative effect on those who worship, virtually ignoring the thing itself, the worship of God. And some focus on the expressive function of worship—we express our feelings, our convictions, our commitments—and virtually ignore the thing itself, the worship of God.

Common though these functional understandings are, they distract us from the worship of God. If we are formed by worship, it is by engaging
in the activities of worshiping God that we are formed. We express our “religious affections,” as Jonathan Edwards called them, by engaging in the activities of worshiping God. The worship of God is basic. Its formative and expressive functions, though important, are secondary. When we focus on the functions of worship, human beings displace God as the focus of our attention.

We Worship God with Our Bodies

A fundamental feature of Christian communal worship is that we worship God with our bodies—with our minds too, of course, yet indeed with our bodies. It is by using our vocal cords to utter words and sing hymns that we praise God; it is by using our ears to listen that we apprehend what God says to us in the reading of Scripture and in the preaching of the sermon; it is by kneeling and bowing that we humble ourselves before God as we say our petitions. Elsewhere I have employed so-called speech-act theory to explore, in depth, how this works: how it is that by making certain sounds with my vocal cords I do that quite different thing of praising God.

Of course, not everyone can speak or sing, not everyone can listen, not everyone can kneel or bow. But everybody who participates in Christian worship can perform, and does perform, at least some of these bodily activities. Everyone who participates in any way worships God with their own body. Nobody worships as if they had no body, as if they were disembodied.

It is not only by worshiping God with our bodies that we incorporate the physical world into our worship. We also do so by employing material things and substances in our performance of liturgical actions: water, bread, wine, crosses, candles, fire, Bibles, hymnals, liturgical texts, in some traditions also incense, in some traditions also icons, likewise on and on. We worship God not only with our bodies but also with water, with fire, with bread, with wine. We do not leave the physical world behind when we assemble to worship God; we bring it with us in order to incorporate it within our worship, thereby bestowing upon it a dignity it had not previously known.

Who Are the Liturgical Agents?

Who are the agents in Christian communal worship? The answer seems obvious: all those who have assembled for worship, the people and those who lead

them. To us this answer seems obvious, but to many in previous centuries it would have seemed not obvious but false.

In late medieval Western Christianity, it was commonly thought that liturgy is the work of the clergy; they are the liturgical agents. With the exception of Easter, when laypeople were expected to receive the bread of the Eucharist, laypeople were to use attendance at a liturgical enactment as the occasion for private devotions that were, ideally, related in some way to what was going on in the liturgy. Books were published giving guidance for such devotions. In his fascinating book *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580*, Eamon Duffy writes:

> The pious lay person at Mass was urged to internalize [by vividly imagining the events of Christ’s life and death] the external actions of the priest and ministers. The early sixteenth-century treatise *Meditatyons for goostely exercyse, In the tyme of the mass* interprets the gestures and movements of the priest in terms of the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and urges the layman to “Call to your remembrance and Imprinte Inwardly In your heart by holy meditation, the holl processe of the passion, frome the Mandy unto the point of chists deeth.” The effect of this sort of guidance was to encourage the development of representational [i.e., symbolic] elements in the liturgy and to set the laity looking for these elements.²

It was typical of participants in the so-called Liturgical Movement of the early twentieth century, and of writers influenced by them, to claim that in classical and Koine Greek the term *leitourgia* referred to *actions of the people*³ and then to use that etymological claim to make the polemical point that liturgy is not what the clergy alone do but what the people do along with their leaders. An indication of the success of the Liturgical Movement on this point is that it now seems obvious to us that not just the clergy but also *the people* are liturgical agents. Liturgy is not just what clergy do.

But are the people and those who lead them the only liturgical agents? We could ask what the term “the people” means in this question. Does it refer to the individual persons, or does it refer to a collective entity, the people? Is it just individual persons who praise God together, or is it also the collective entity—the people—praising God? Important though that question is, let it

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3. I understand it to be the view of all Greek scholars that this is not what *leitourgia* meant in classical and Koine Greek. The term referred not to action of the people but to an action for the people. A *leitourgia* was the contribution by a well-to-do person to some public project—the building of a ship, for example. Andrew Carnegie’s funding of libraries across the United States was his *leitourgia*—his liturgy.
pass. However we understand the reference of the term “the people,” are the people and those who lead them the only liturgical agents?

They are not. Along with many others, I hold that God is also a liturgical agent. When we address God in praise, thanksgiving, confession, and so forth, God listens. By the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the sermon, God speaks to us. By the celebrant offering us the bread and wine of the Eucharist, Christ offers himself to us. And if God blesses what we are doing, the Spirit is active among us. The role of God as liturgical agent is discussed in considerable detail in several of the essays in this volume.
Introduction

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Finding myself paired with Nick Wolterstorff in this volume—he introducing the series and I introducing this first book within it—takes me back to the summer of 1988, when Nick and I were both teaching summer courses at Regent College, Vancouver. We were staying down the hall from each other in a faculty residence and frequently met to discuss what we were doing. Among other topics was the fact that the students taking his course and the students taking my course (in the same time period, so there was no overlap of students) were comparing notes and coming to the conclusion that we were saying quite similar things.

This was initially puzzling. My course was a historical study of Jesus in his first-century context, a foretaste of my 1996 book Jesus and the Victory of God. Nick’s course was titled Liturgy and Justice. What could such different topics have in common? Reflecting on that now, over a quarter of a century later, I think we were both part of a larger movement of thought. The present series of books is a later fruit of that movement. So now, rather than weary the reader by “introducing” the present essays one by one—they can do that for themselves—we may profitably reflect on the significant change that has

come over much of Western Christianity in the last generation, with the new interest in liturgy as a fascinating and important marker.

With hindsight we can see that the evangelical movements of the middle and late twentieth century were heavily influenced by forms of Platonism. The eventual goal was that the “soul” should leave “earth” and go to “heaven.” What mattered in the present was therefore to turn away from the things of earth and cultivate the life of heaven, starting with the initial act of justifying faith. This should not then be compromised by any adding of “works,” since that would be taking back with a Pelagian left hand what had just been given away by an Augustinian right hand. All this was heard within a Platonic world. The much-revered C. S. Lewis himself, though often pointing toward a more Jewish vision of renewed creation, allowed his alter ego in the children’s stories to murmur that the Narnian experience was “all in Plato.”

Thus, when it came to Jesus and the New Testament, we knew in advance what ought to be said: Jesus was the divine Son of God. No doubt he was a human being, but that really wasn’t the point (this remains a problem in systematic theology to this day). Any attempt to locate Jesus in his actual historical setting was suspect; the attacks of “historical criticism” had to be kept at arm’s length. This often led to a suspicion of the task and discipline of “history” itself—and with that, to a wariness about consulting, as historical waymarks, the Jewish writings of the period. Were they not concentrating on earthly things and advocating “works”? In my own research, then and subsequently, I was firmly rejecting this whole approach. The Word, after all, became flesh.

Likewise, when it came to issues of justice, locally or globally, the strongly Platonic streak of evangelical Christianity urged people to resist any engagement or involvement. These were “worldly” issues, and we should leave them to the politicians and social workers. Our task was to save souls for eternity, not to oil the wheels of a machine that would one day fall over a cliff. This regularly meant supporting the status quo, or at least discouraging people from questioning it. This was what Nick was challenging, as he has continued to do.

The same approach showed up, finally, in liturgy. The rejection of apparently High Church practices—processions, robes, incense, chanted Psalms, not to mention genuflection and crossing of oneself—had several cultural roots, not least the folk memories of sixteenth-century Protestant martyrs and, in Britain and thence in America, the sense that the Reformation had successfully freed the country from the pope’s foreign rule. This was, again,

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coupled with the suggestion that any kind of organized liturgy was a covert form of “works,” and since Protestants always suspected Roman Catholics on that front, there was all the more reason to deconstruct the liturgy and its attendant practices. The second half of the twentieth century thus saw more and more evangelical churches, even in mainline denominations like my own, shedding the last vestiges of formal liturgy, replacing the organ with a rock group, and exchanging the robed choir for sound technicians and video projectors. Somehow these didn’t count as “works” in the same sense. The charismatic renewal has sometimes, no doubt accidentally, added to this an impression that any “prepared” or printed liturgy was by definition a restriction of Spirit-led freedom, though as that movement comes of age, there are welcome signs of a serious return to liturgical responsibility. But in these ways the cult of “spontaneity,” a major feature of secular culture at the time, smuggled itself into unwitting churches under cover of a basically Platonic spirituality. Again, Nick’s work on liturgy has refused to accept this movement and has charted a quite different course.

The analogy between what I was doing with Jesus in his historical context and what Nick Wolterstorff was doing with justice and with liturgy should thus be clear. We were both trying to roll back the tide of Platonism and re-establish the truth that God the Creator could be believed in and honored by bodies, history, communities, and even rituals. After all, even the most free of free churches have “rituals.” Nobody suggests, I think, that the “freedom of the Spirit” in worship might be compromised because the guitarist needs to practice those chord sequences in advance. And to suppose that God the Creator was indifferent to injustice—that he was not appalled at racist policies in South Africa or the Southern states, or at the wickedness of corrupt tyrants or warlords—meant turning a blind eye not just to the Old Testament but also to the teaching of Jesus himself. (But then, the actual teaching of Jesus never featured large in evangelical circles, since one knew in advance that his real concern, supposedly backed up by a truncated reading of Paul, must have been to save souls for heaven.)

Cultural changes never take place overnight, and many churches still display the confusions I have listed, and more besides. The reason for this is fairly clear (as I have argued in more detail in my 2019 book History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Western world as a whole absorbed a reborn Epicureanism. God was pushed upstairs, and the world below continued under its own

steam—in politics, history, economics, science, ethics, and other spheres too. (The idea that this secularism is a new thing, the result of scientific inquiry, is a mere smokescreen: the appeal to ancient Epicureanism is clear throughout the movement.) Things that the churches had done before—including education, medicine, and the care of the poor—were taken over by the state, leaving the church to save souls and teach people to pray to the now-distant God. And the churches have, by and large, gone along for the ride, accepting a diminished role and not noticing, for instance, that things commanded and modeled in the New Testament, like speaking God’s truth to the powers of the world (think of Jesus addressing Pilate in John 18 and 19!), were being taken over by other agencies, in that case the journalists. The churches’ retreat into Platonism, in other words, has been an understandable though highly regrettable reaction to modern Epicureanism. No matter if God is in a far-off “heaven”; we have “souls” that can get in touch with him there and finally escape to join him in his distant paradise.

But Platonism remains deeply unsatisfactory for any serious Christian, for any reader of Scripture. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation insists upon the goodness of creation and upon the solid promise that the Creator God will put creation to rights at last. This essentially Jewish vision was what lay behind Jesus’s announcement, the key to his whole public career, that God’s kingdom was coming “on earth as in heaven” (cf. Matt. 6:9–10) albeit through the unexpected means of his own messianic death, resurrection, and ascension. This is what Paul meant when he declared in his most famous letter that the good news of Jesus unveiled to the world the faithfulness of God—God the Creator, God the covenant-keeper. This result, not in an escape from the present creation, groaning in travail as it is, but in the redemption of that creation itself, something much Western Protestantism had never really thought through.

Once we grasp this Jewish vision of the gospel and discern the many ways in which it supplies the proper answer to the Epicureanism of Western culture, many lines of thought open up, including the kind of historical study of the New Testament that I have undertaken and the work for justice, both in theory and in practice, that Nick Wolterstorff has been doing. Between those two, history and justice, we find liturgy: the point at which, and means by which, the body of Christ here on earth joins with the whole company of angels and archangels in heaven, in anticipation not of a supposed ultimate time when we shall leave earth and go to join that heavenly host, but of the promised time when “all things in heaven and on earth” will be united in the Messiah himself (cf. Eph. 1:10), when the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev. 21:1) will be not two things but one, because God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). All things will be put right (justice); all things have in principle been
put right in Jesus, the Messiah and Lord (history); the church celebrates all that will be (justice) in advance by gladly rehearsing the story of what has been put right in Jesus (liturgy).

Christian liturgy—as the essays in this book explain from many angles—must therefore be formed, and where necessary re-formed, on the principle of inaugurated eschatology. By that I mean that in Jesus, as Israel’s Messiah, the Creator God has launched his sovereign and saving rule on earth as in heaven. The goal is to bring all things in both spheres into one; the means to this is sketched in the Sermon on the Mount. The church’s task in the present is to live by heaven’s joy amid earth’s continuing sorrow; to celebrate heaven’s sovereignty in the face of earth’s tyrannies and anarchies; to invoke heaven’s healing love on the world, which is suffering from the sickness unto death. Every act of Christian worship, from the solitary Christian kneeling down in a private room to the vast cathedral congregation singing its heart out, is an anticipation of that eventual joy, that sovereignty, that healing love. It is a temple moment, when heaven and earth are held together, with image-bearing humans standing dangerously in the middle. It is a Sabbath moment, when the age to come arrives mysteriously in the present as we anticipate God’s completion of the new creation.

What is more, every act of worship joins the present-day church with generations long gone. This is why the historical study of liturgy matters so much. It isn’t just that we can learn from our elders and (often) betters. It is that their worship remains part of the whole worship of God’s Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled people, in which we also partake. We have a responsibility the other way too: so to worship in the present that those who come after us may be able to share with us while also bringing their own new and particular gifts to the table.

That is another reason why serious reflection on liturgy, such as we find in this book ably edited by Khalia Williams and Mark Lamport, matters so much for the Protestant and evangelical traditions at this present time. In many contemporary churches, the puzzling rejection not only of the great hymns but even of the Psalms themselves, along with many great prayers, means that a generation may be growing up seriously impoverished. My hope and prayer for this book is that it will help our churches to explore, delight in, learn from, and rehabit the best of the past, and in particular to understand and appreciate what good liturgy is and why it matters. It is time, and more than time, to put away our Platonic prejudices and to embrace, in worship as in so many other ways, the good news that in Jesus the life of heaven has come to earth and that in the Spirit that heaven-and-earth life is ours as well, anticipating and thus sustaining our hope for God’s completion of what was launched through Jesus. May this book be a means, under God, of that celebration and that hope.
PART 1

Biblical Practices of Worship

Exegetical and Biblical Theology
Old Testament and Worship

Andrew E. Hill

The Bible records the story of “salvation history,” God’s progressive plan of redemption that culminates in the Christ event: the life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Messiah. The ultimate destination of God’s story is worship, the worship by his people Israel (Isa. 43:7), the worship by his church (1 Pet. 2:4–5), and the worship by the nations (Ps. 86:9). Worship is “the human response to God.”1 According to Robert Webber, “worship does God’s story”; that is, worship is a narrative that tells the story of God’s redemptive activity in history.2 The basic plotline of the biblical story may be outlined as follows:

1. Daniel I. Block, For the Glory of God (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 23. Robert E. Webber’s definition of worship in its broadest sense as “a meeting between God and His people” found in Worship Old and New (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 11, is helpful to the discussion of Old Testament worship, especially since the tabernacle was also known as the “tent of meeting” (Exod. 27:21; 28:43). This chapter assumes a progressive or developing monotheism for the Hebrew people from Abraham to the time of Moses (cf. Block, For the Glory of God, 35–37). A nascent trinitarian understanding of the One God is also assumed, given the “plurality” of God revealed in the Old Testament (with references to the Creator God, the Spirit of God [Gen. 1:1–2; cf. Isa. 63:10–11], and the angel of the Lord, who receives worship [Exod. 3:2–4; Judg. 6:21–22; 13:20]).
Old Testament Worship and the Primeval Prologue: Genesis 1–11

The early chapters of Genesis portray humanity in a direct relationship with God as Creator. This immediate and ongoing experience of God’s divine Presence emphasizes worship in the form of intimate fellowship with the Creator (cf. Gen. 3:8) and in the form of service to God in priestly management of their garden environment (2:15). This human propensity for worship is rooted in the nature of persons created in God’s image (the imago Dei), the image (essence) and likeness (nature) of God (1:26–27). Significantly, God’s creation of woman as the fitting complement to man (2:20–24) “completes the preparation of the image of God and emphasizes an equal share in fulfilling God’s will on earth, specifically, worshiping and serving the LORD, ruling and having dominion over the earth, and producing life—not just physical life but eternal and spiritual life.” The fall of humanity was both “paradise lost” and “worship lost.” Our ancestral parents were overcome by the temptation to become “like God” (3:5). The mystery of divine testing and an explanation for the probationary experience of humanity in the garden aside, God delights in loving obedience from his human creatures, not forced submission.

3. Central to this redemptive plan is the “offspring theology” announced in Gen. 3:15—the promise of a child who will overcome the enemy of humanity and set all things right. The means by which God redeems fallen creation is in the reestablishment of relationship with humanity through a series of covenant enactments. These covenants begin with Adam (though the term “covenant” is not found in Gen. 1–2; cf. Hosea 6:7), Noah and his family (Gen. 9), continue with Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 12; 15; 17), are extended to the Israelite nation through Moses at Mount Sinai (esp. Exod. 19–24), are expanded to include kingship through the line of David (2 Sam. 7), are consolidated and universalized in the new covenant proclaimed by Jeremiah (Jer. 31), and find fulfillment in the New Covenant realized in the Christ event (Luke 22).

4. See Allen P. Ross, Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 106, on Adam and Eve as archetypical Levites.


7. Worship is an act of the will as well as an emotional response of the heart to God. Note the repeated imperatives to love God and obey his commands in the Mosaic Law (e.g., Deut. 6:4–5; 10:12; 11:1).
After the fall, humanity responded to God in worship in various ways: presenting tribute offerings (Gen. 4:1–5), calling on the name of the Lord in prayer (4:26), living an obedient life before God (5:22, 24; 6:9), offering sacrifices of thanksgiving (8:20–22); accepting God’s post-flood covenant to fulfill the earlier creation mandates to populate the earth (9:18–19; cf. 1:28). Although the origins of proper worship of God after the fall are unclear, it is likely that God revealed liturgical forms by which reverent awe might be appropriately expressed.8

Two of the worship accounts in Genesis 1–11 are especially instructive for biblically informed worship. The first, the presentation of tribute offerings by Cain and Abel (4:1–5), places emphasis on the heart and attitude of the worshiper, not the type or quality of offering given. As Daniel Block observes, Cain responded in anger to God’s rejection of his offering, not in humility and remorse.9 His anger led to the murder of his brother and lying to God (4:5–9). In retrospect, the New Testament indicates that Abel’s offering was accepted because God deemed him to be righteous (Heb. 11:4).

The second account, the post-flood worship of Noah, also contributes to the biblical understanding of post-fall and post-flood worship. Our basic definition of worship is seen in Noah’s response to God’s deliverance with thanksgiving, symbolized in ritual sacrifice (Gen. 8:20). The mysterious but consistent interplay of God’s work of judgment and redemption is situated in covenant relationship (Gen. 9). A series of God-initiated covenant relationships with humanity will undergird his redemptive story (cf. Gen. 12:1–3). Noah’s altar building and presentation of clean animals as burnt offerings foreshadows one of the core rituals for worshiping God in the patriarchal and Mosaic eras of Israelite history (Gen. 8:20–22; cf. 15:9–11; Exod. 20:24–26).

Old Testament Worship during the Patriarchal Period (2000–1400 BC)

Progressive revelation in the Old Testament (i.e., the gradual self-disclosure of God to his people) implies a progressive understanding and practice of worship as well. The variety of terms for worship used in the Old Testament reveal the multifaceted character of Hebrew worship and indirectly speak to its developmental aspects.10

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10. One word for worship is often translated “seek, inquire” (Heb. dāraš; Pss. 24:6; 69:32 [33 in MT]; Isa. 11:10), indicating that genuine worship is a quest for God—not out of duty, but freely and earnestly in gratitude for God’s goodness (Pss. 27:4; 8–9; 63:1–4). Worship is to revere, venerate, and fear God with a sense of awe and respect (Heb. yānē’). The righteous do fear the Lord because of who he is as a unique, holy, just, loving, and merciful God; and for what he does...
The developmental nature of Hebrew worship is also evidenced at times in the worship responses of the patriarchs to specific events of divine revelation. For instance, altar building was a key element of patriarchal worship. These altars often marked site-specific places of theophanies and were associated with acts of ritual sacrifice and prayer (Gen. 12:8; 26:25; 35:7; cf. Exod. 20:24–26). In addition, altar building sometimes precipitated a change in place name as a result of divine intervention and a dramatic word from God (e.g., “Adonay-Yireh [The Lord Will Provide],” Gen. 22:14; El-Bethel, [“God of Bethel”], 35:7). The numerous names ascribed to God through the biblical narrative were another way the Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs came to know the character, attributes, personality, and purposes of their God.11

The worship by Abram and Sarai was divinely initiated: their worship of God occurred as he revealed who he is in word and deed. And that worship was divinely motivated: their worship was the human response to divine self-disclosure (notably in theophany). We learn that “the LORD said to Abram, ‘Leave’” (Gen. 12:1), and “Abram left” (12:4). His response of obedience was an act of worship, another illustration of the basic definition of worship selected to frame this study.12

During this era significant developments in worship include covenant-renewal ceremonies (Gen. 15:8–21; 35:11–15); the rite of circumcision as a sign of covenant obedience (17:9–14); prayer (praise and thanksgiving, 12:8; 13:4); intercession (18:22–23) and petition (24:12); altar building (e.g., 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:9); the setting up of stone pillars and pouring of libations as a drink offering (28:18, 22; 35:14); taking of vows (31:13); sacrificial offerings of animals and foodstuffs (31:54; 46:1); pilgrimage to sites of theophany (35:1); tithing and a cultic meal of bread and wine (14:17–24).

The Joseph story supplies a definition of divine providence: God’s overruling for good (Gen. 50:20). This theological truth will inform the prayers as Creator, Covenant Maker, and Israel’s Redeemer (Lev. 19:32; Ps. 27:1; Hab. 3:2). Worship is also “work” (Heb. ʿābad) in the sense of performing a service to God (Exod. 3:12; Isa. 19:21, 23). The “loyal service” of worship includes obedience to the commandments of God (Deut. 10:12, 20). Drawing near to God (Heb. nāgaš; qārab) is another aspect of Old Testament worship, implying the observance of appropriate protocol and proper rites of purification (Exod. 19:22; 20:21; Lev. 9:6–7; Num. 4:19; Jer. 30:21). These worship-related terms indicate that God is approachable and desires to have a meaningful relationship with his people (Deut. 4:7). For a catalog of Old Testament worship-related terms, see “Old Testament Vocabulary of Worship,” in The Complete Library of Christian Worship, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: StarSong, 1993), 1:3–9.


12. God’s promise to bless the nations through Abraham and Sarah was tied to a specific piece of real estate (Gen. 12:1–3). The divine placement of Israel in the land of Canaan, or Palestine, thus at the crossroads of the ancient trade routes, facilitated the Hebrews’ role as the light of God’s revelation to the nations (cf. Isa. 49:6; 51:4; 60:2–3).

Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek, the priest and king of Salem, is an important episode in God’s redemptive story (Gen. 14:17–20). Abram and Melchizedek have the “Most High God” in common. He blesses Abram, suggesting his own primacy. The psalmist references the priesthood of Melchizedek in the context of Davidic kingship. On the basis of the Melchizedek story, the book of Hebrews develops the theology of the greater priesthood of Jesus the Messiah (Heb. 4:14–5:10; 7:1–28). Ralph Martin observes that “at this early offering of thankful worship to Yahweh, the basic elements of Israel’s worship form were present. From [Israel’s] nomadic beginnings, [its] worship included theophanies, promises of the land, the practice of marking important places with an altar, the figure of a high priest, and a cultic celebration using bread and wine.”

The story of Abraham’s “binding” of Isaac (Gen. 22) is an example of the interface of culture and revelation. The mystery of testing and providing in God’s redemptive dealings with fallen humanity, including the introduction of the divine name Adonay-Yireh, “The Lord Will Provide,” is emphasized (v. 14). The story dramatizes a theological truth by means of an object lesson and teaches that the ultimate purpose in worship is the glory of God. The memorializing of a foundational theological principle through story, in this case God’s disapproval of human sacrifice, affirms the principle of “substitution” in sacrificial worship (cf. Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31; 18:10).

Old Testament Worship during the Mosaic Period (1400–1000 BC)

The miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the covenantal experience at Mount Sinai are known as the formative period of Israelite religion. The exodus from Egypt is the major redemptive event of the Old Testament and the prototype of Christ’s atoning work (cf. John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7). The character of worship as spiritual warfare is clearly portrayed in the exodus event, when God brought judgment on the Egyptian gods (cf. Exod. 12:12; 15:3; 18:11).

One striking feature of the Hebrew exodus narrative is the revelation of the divine name YHWH to Moses prior to his ministry as Israel’s deliverer (Exod. 3:14). The ineffable name YHWH, the “I AM,” embodies several aspects of God’s nature and character, including holiness, transcendence,

immanence, provision, and eternality (see God’s “self-characterization” in Exod. 34:6–7).  

Central to the Sinai covenant experience is the conflict between the ideology of Israelite monotheism and the pervasive polytheism of the ancient biblical world, with its attendant idolatry (cf. Exod. 20:2–7). On the plains of Moab, Moses led the Israelites in an important renewal of the covenant law that reinforces this “One-ness” or “Only-ness” of God and provides the baseline for the Shema, the core prayer and creed of later Judaism (Deut. 6:4).  

The covenant ratified at Mount Sinai served as a charter and legitimized and standardized the institutions of Hebrew religion. Specifically, the covenant was the foundation for the sacrificial system, the Sabbath, the tabernacle, the priesthood, the liturgical calendar (bringing redemptive rhythm and a sense of holiness to time), and also for the moral, civil, and ceremonial law designed to reshape Hebrew society and religion after the pattern of God’s holiness. God’s desire to live among his people in a portable tent-sanctuary (Exod. 25:8) lays the foundation for the “Immanuel theology” (Isa. 7–8; Matt. 1:23). This “God with us” theology will ultimately be realized in the incarnation of Jesus the Messiah and the gifting of the indwelling Holy Spirit to the Christian(s) (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19).  

The Passover became the defining festival of Hebrew religion; it was observed by a memorial meal and perpetuated through a catechism (Exod. 12–13). The Passover festival celebrates the exodus from Egypt as the supreme act of divine judgment and deliverance in Hebrew history (Exod. 6:6; 15:13; Deut. 7:8; 13:5). The exodus event exalted the God of the covenant, YHWH, who redeemed Israel (Ps. 77:12–20 [13–21]). It stood as a perpetual reminder to successive generations that redemption inevitably leads to the worship of YHWH (Exod. 15:18).  

14. On the theological significance of the name YHWH (Lord), see Block, For the Glory of God, 36–38. The Thirteen Attributes of God in later Judaism are extracted from this passage (Exod. 34:6–7); cf. Hayim H. Donin, To Be a Jew (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 22. The communication of divine revelation through theophany (i.e., a visible and/or audible manifestation of God) permeates the exodus event: “the angel of the Lord” (Exod. 3:2); other angelic beings (23:20); miracle (8:16–19); flame in a bush (3:2); fire, smoke, thunder, and lightning at Mount Sinai (19:18–20); vision/dream (Num. 12:6–8); voice (Exod. 24:1); cloud of glory (16:10); cloud of guidance/pillar of fire (40:34–38); and meeting with God “face-to-face” (33:11, 20–23) are recorded in the narrative.  

15. The Shema is expressed in three passages from the Torah of Moses (Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num. 15:37–41). On the Shema as the “Great Commandment” of later Judaism, see Hill, Enter His Courts with Praise!, 110, 119.  

16. For treatment of “Immanuel Theology,” see Andrew E. Hill, 1 & 2 Chronicles, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 246–47.  

17. For fuller discussions of the exodus event as the formative stage of Hebrew worship, see Ross, Recalling the Hope of Glory, 169–208; Vernon M. Whaley, Called to Worship: From the Dawn of Creation to the Final Amen (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 55–68.
The Mosaic covenant enacted at Mount Sinai applied the principle of God’s holiness to all of life for Israel (Exod. 19:6; Lev. 11:44). In addition to the holiness of God, other key theological principles, underscored by the instructions for the tabernacle and the officiating priesthood, include substitutionary sacrifice, mediation of worship through the priesthood, the giving of the tithes and offerings, the need for preparation in worship, and the tension between divine immanence and transcendence (cf. Isa. 57:15; Gal. 3:24). The concepts of sacred space, the value of visual theology by way of symbolism and aesthetics, are introduced in the decor, furnishings, and architecture of the tabernacle (cf. Exod. 25–40). Israelite worship was carefully prescribed and highly detailed: God was his own worship leader!

Old Testament Worship during the Hebrew Conquest and Settlement Period

Conflicting loyalties were the issue for the Israelites during the settlement period under Joshua and beyond. Joshua’s charge to Israel, “Choose this day whom you will serve,” challenged the people to covenant obedience under the rule of YHWH (Josh. 24:15). Life in Canaan tested the Israelites’ loyalty to YHWH, their Deliverer and Provider. Agricultural fertility was essential to survival, and the question centered on who could provide the water resources needed for sustaining human and animal life in a land depending on rainfall. Many of the Hebrews chose to serve the Baals, the “local deities” supposedly responsible for rainfall and fertility, instead of the Lord God. Preferring idolatry and the attendant immorality, the Hebrews languished through repeated downward spirals of social violence, religious apostasy, and foreign oppression (Judg. 2:10–19). YHWH, ever faithful, delivered his people through a series of judges empowered by the Lord’s Spirit in response to Israel’s repentance (e.g., Othniel, Judg. 3:10; Samson, 14:19).

Old Testament First Temple Worship (966–587 BC)

The transition from theocracy to monarchy was as revolutionary for Hebrew religion as it was for Hebrew politics. Chief among the several religious issues raised by Israelite kingship was the notion of God’s “residency” among his people. The tabernacle theology of Moses respected God as one who was both “resident” and “nomad,” in that his sanctuary was portable. The Jerusalem temple theology that originated with kings David and Solomon restricted God’s “residency” to a permanent site. This had implications for “taming” God and
opened the door to potential abuses as leaders fostered the idea of the divine Presence in Jerusalem, protecting the material world that the Israelites claimed. 18

A related tension for worship during the monarchical era was the role of king as a religious functionary and thus the relationship between the institution of kingship rooted in Judah (Gen. 49:10–11) and the priesthood rooted in Levi (Deut. 33:8–11). King Saul was rejected by God due, in part, to his usurpation of priestly duties (1 Sam. 13; cf. 15). By contrast, fugitive David received holy bread from the priests at Nob (1 Sam. 21:1–9). As king, David organized the procession bringing the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem and wore the Levitical ephod for that event (2 Sam. 6:12–14; 1 Chron. 15:27). The story of Melchizedek—the Canaanite priest of Salem who shared a cultic meal with Abram, received a tithe from Abram, and blessed him—foreshadows the eventual merging of the offices of priest and king in a single messianic figure (cf. Ps. 110; Heb. 4:14–7:28).

Once installed as king over all Israel, David transferred the ark of the covenant from the house of Abinadab in Kiriath Jearim (where it had resided for twenty years) to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1–19; 1 Chron. 15–16). 19 This was a “national” event, as David gathered all Israel in Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:3, 25, 28). He was prominent among all the priests, Levites, and Levitical musicians in leading the joyful procession (1 Chron. 16:1–27). The Chronicler is careful to note that David and all Israel brought the ark up into Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:28). David’s orchestration of the all-Israel event demonstrated his loyalties both to the God of Israel and the nation of Israel as the people of God. Situating the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem also served to legitimate David’s rule under God’s authority and made the city the political and religious center of his newly founded kingdom.

David’s innovative move to house the ark of the covenant in a special tent established in Jerusalem also had implications for forging a unified Hebrew people (1 Chron. 15:1–2; 16:1). The tabernacle of Lord was stationed in Gibeon (about 5.5 miles north-northwest of Jerusalem) during the reigns of David and Solomon (1 Chron. 16:39). During this transitional period, before the building of Solomon’s temple, the Levitical priesthood was divided into two cohorts, with one serving at the Jerusalem tent housing the ark, and the other serving at the tabernacle in Gibeon (1 Chron. 16:37–42).

Also important to the development of Hebrew religion during the monarchical period were the ideas and attendant ritual practices related to sin and

18. Cf. Ross, Recalling the Hope of Glory, 321; and Block, For the Glory of God, 71, on Jeremiah’s condemnation of temple worship.
repentance (2 Sam. 12–13; Pss. 32; 51); the need for preparation in worship is seen in the “entrance psalms” (Pss. 15; 24) and in the development of musical guilds and the role of choral and instrumental music in temple worship under the auspices of King David (1 Chron. 25). The reorganization of the Levitical priesthood (1 Chron. 23–24; 26) and the reemergence of the importance of religious symbol, notably in the ark of the covenant, was showcased in the satellite worship center established by David and brought an entirely new dimension to Hebrew worship (1 Chron. 15–16; cf. 2 Chron. 7:12). Further distinctive were regarding obedience to God’s directives as ranking higher than ritual sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:10–31) and guarding against the religious syncretism, idolatry, and false religions of other surrounding people groups (1 Kings 3:1–2; 11:1–13).

David’s role as the organizer of the musical guilds and his presumed leadership in the development of the Psalter for the music of the temple liturgy comes as no surprise (1 Chron. 6:31–32; 25:1–31). He is credited with writing nearly half the songs in the Psalms. David even commissioned the writing of psalms for special occasions, like the return of the ark of God to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:7; cf. 13:8). Singing some psalms was also part of the temple dedication (Ps. 30), Sabbath worship (Ps. 92), temple worship (2 Chron. 29:28, 30; Ps. 100:2; Amos 8:3), and other special festivals (Isa. 30:29). The technical notes preserved the Psalter’s superscripts regarding musical scores and instrumentation further demonstrate the use of the Psalms as the hymnbook of the temple.20

The Old Testament gives considerable attention to the elaborate preparations for the Jerusalem temple made by King David as “general contractor,” and the construction of the extravagant worship space by his son and successor, King Solomon (1 Chron. 22–29). The Jerusalem temple was the focal point of Hebrew worship, housing the divine Presence and serving as the very footstool of the God of Israel in his rule over the entirety of his creation (1 Chron. 28:2; cf. Pss. 99:5; 132:7). The temple was both a worship center for ritual sacrifice (2 Chron. 7:12) and a house of prayer (1 Kings 8; Isa. 56:7; Matt. 21:13). Increasingly, the temple was associated with prayer, especially by Hebrews displaced or dispersed by the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles. The theology of prayer voiced in Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the temple took on new meaning for the Hebrew diaspora (1 Kings 8:33–34, 52–53).

The Prophetic Response to Kingship

The Old Testament prophets served God and the people of Israel (and the nations) as the “conscience” of the Hebrew monarchy and as “warriors” in the cosmic battle between true and false worship (cf. 1 Kings 18:17). The prophet was the voice of the transcendent and Holy Other in promoting the knowledge of God (Hosea 6:3). As ardent iconoclasts, the prophets were also boldly challenging corrupt leadership in Hebrew political and religious life (Amos 5:21–22). They were the voice of the Hebrew quest for the “ideal” life, calling people to repentance (Isa. 1:16–18) and proclaiming a Torah-based life that practiced the love of God and neighbor (Deut. 6:4; Lev. 19:18, 33–34). The twin themes of the prophetic message focused on the restoration of proper worship (cf. Isa. 57; 58) and a lifestyle of social justice (Mic. 6:8).

Old Testament Worship and the Babylonian Exile (605–587 BC)

The series of Babylonian invasions of Judah, culminating in the sack of Jerusalem in 587 BC and the subsequent deportation of tens of thousands of Hebrews to Mesopotamia, profoundly impacted the religious life of Israel (2 Kings 24:10–17; 25:1–26; 2 Chron. 36:15–20). The political institution of kingship and the religious institution of the temple were overthrown and dissolved. Through continued covenant violations, the Hebrews earned the Lord’s curse for disobedience and as a result forfeited the land of promise (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). The unthinkable had happened. What had seemed impossible to the Hebrews was now reality. The Lord had indeed scorned his altar, disowned and abandoned his personal sanctuary, and delivered his own people to the enemy (Lam. 2:7).

However, neither the loss of the temple nor the relocation of the Hebrew captives to Babylonia caused the worship of the Lord to cease. The Babylonian diaspora meant that the worship of God was now disconnected from the land of covenant promise. The focus of Hebrew religion shifted from the temple-based rituals of sacrificial worship to the nonsacrificial aspects of worship.


22. The Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom’s Israelites as a result of the Syro-Ephraimitic war (734–32 BC) and the Assyrian sack of Samaria in 722 BC cannot be overlooked (cf. 2 Kings 15; 16:5–9; 17; 2 Chron. 28:5–21; Isa. 7–9). Several thousands of Hebrews were deported to Mesopotamia in the aftermath of those conflicts.
of worship. If the books of Lamentations and Psalms are any indication, the corporate worship of the First Temple period gave way to a greater emphasis on individual worship and personal piety, highlighting repentance and confession, lament, prayer, and praise, especially in song and hymn (cf. Pss. 137; 149; 150; Lam. 3:19–27).

The prophetic voices of the day reinforced this more personalized approach to worship with their teaching about individual responsibility before God for sin and repentance (Jer. 31:27–30; Ezek. 18:1–20). Daniel offers insight into the personal spirituality of the diaspora Jewish communities, with his discipline of praying three times each day while facing Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10; cf. Ps. 55:17). The experience of personal worship in the diaspora brought new meaning to Psalm 141:1–2 for Hebrew captives, sending up prayers to God like the incense offering of the temple ritual.

The destruction of the first temple altered worship leadership as well. The Levitical priesthood no longer mediated worship for the Hebrew people. For their part, the priests became pastor-teachers during the exilic period, offering instruction in Torah and perhaps leading worship for house assemblies (cf. Ezek. 33:30–32). Jewish tradition finds the roots of the synagogue in the gathering of the elders at Ezekiel’s home during the Babylonian exile (Ezek. 8:1; 9:6; 14:1). The references are too cryptic to warrant definitive conclusions. By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, these “officials and elders” certainly did constitute the civil and religious power structures of postexilic Jerusalem (Ezra 6:7–14; 10:8).

The reference to “hanging up the harps” in Babylonian exile is often cited as evidence for the disuse of instrumental music in Second Temple and later synagogue Judaism (cf. Ps. 137:1–5). How long it took for the Hebrews to abandon musical instrumentation in worship is unclear, and so are the degree and the geographical extent to which that may have happened. Texts like Nehemiah 12:27–28; Ezekiel 33:32; and Psalms 149; 150 suggest the use of instrumental music during the postexilic period in continuity with earlier Hebrew worship.23

The Babylonian exile corrected a corrupt theology of “sacred place” in Hebrew religion: some leaders misunderstood and at times sought to manipulate God (claiming that existence of the physical structure of the Jerusalem temple guaranteed the blessing and security of the divine Presence; cf. Jer. 7). Ezekiel’s visions of God’s abandonment of the Jerusalem temple were sobering reminders that God was not tethered to a building made with hands

(Ezek. 1; 10; 43:1–12; cf. 1 Kings 8:27). Finally, the new-covenant promises of Jeremiah and Ezekiel had dramatic implications for the future development of Hebrew worship in the prophesied age of the messiah (cf. Jer. 31; Ezek. 34; 37).


God commissioned the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to rally the people to rebuild the Jerusalem temple after the return from Babylonian exile. Their overlapping ministries were dated to 520–518 BC (Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1). Haggai and Zechariah had complementary ministries. Haggai called the people to rebuild God’s temple (Hag. 1:8), and Zechariah called the people to rebuild the temple of their heart so they might offer proper worship to God (Zech. 1:3; 8:3; 8–9, 18–23). The people responded in obedience, and the second temple was completed in 515 BC (Ezra 5:1–2; 6:13–18).

Second Temple Jewish worship emphasized prayer, in keeping with the prayer focus associated with Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 8:27–30). Prayers (at times accompanied by fasting) included petition and intercession (Ezra 8:21–23; Neh. 1:4–11), repentance and penitence in the context of covenant renewal and worship (Ezra 9:5–15; Neh. 9:16–37), and praise and thanksgiving for God’s presence and work (Neh. 9:1–15; cf. 12:27–30). Equally important, the worship leaders, the priests and Levites, were ceremonially cleansed for temple service (Neh. 12:27–30; 13:6–13; Zech. 3:3–10; Mal. 2:1–9). The arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem (458 BC) redefined the role of scribe in Israel. As a priest-scribe he became the model for a later class of religious professionals whose sole task was the study and exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures (Ezra 7:10).

The composition of the book of Psalms spans as many as ten centuries, from the ancient song of Moses (Ps. 90) to postexilic sung prayers of praise and thanksgiving (Ps. 146). The Psalter may have been edited into its final form by priests and Levitical musicians around the time the second temple was dedicated (Ezra 6:13–18). Or perhaps that happened later, when the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem were dedicated in the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 12:27–43).

24. The second temple and the worship conducted there remained in place until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, during the First Jewish War (AD 67–73). This chapter assumes that the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was fully formed before the conquest of Syria-Palestine by Alexander the Great and the Greeks in 332 BC.


The poetry of the Psalms features an array of subgenres, including hymns, songs of praise and thanksgiving, storytelling or history psalms, lament, wisdom, imprecatory, royal, Torah, and messianic psalms (as seen through the lens of Christ’s resurrection and eventually the New Testament). Whether in temple, synagogue, or church, the sung prayers of the Psalms have been a staple of corporate worship, personal prayer, and spiritual formation for the people of God for thirty centuries.

Rebuilding the altar of burnt offering before construction of the second temple enabled the returned Israelites to restore the worship centered around ritual sacrifices; they also renewed the keeping of the Hebrew festival calendar (Ezra 3:1–6; 6:19–22; cf. Exod. 23:14–19). The religious reforms of the restoration community by Ezra and Nehemiah prioritized Sabbath observance, keeping the Sabbath day holy, as God had commanded (Neh. 13:15–22; cf. Exod. 20:8–11; 23:10–13).

The public reading of the Torah of Moses as part of a covenant renewal is described as an act of worship (Neh. 8:5–6). The Levites’ instruction in Aramaic, accompanying the reading of God’s law in Hebrew, was done in such a way that the people had a clear understanding of what was being read, fulfilling one of their priestly functions (Neh. 8:7–8; cf. Deut. 33:10; 2 Chron. 17:7–9). Such early Jewish concern for helping the people of God understand the Scriptures is instructive. This event provides precedent for the Septuagint (LXX), the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, some two centuries later.

The postexilic prophets cast a vision for eschatological worship, in keeping with their exilic and pre-exilic predecessors. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi all refer to “the day of the Lord.” Their prophecies include tribute from the nations flowing to the Jerusalem temple (Hag. 2:7), peace among the nations and security for Israel in the presence of God (Hag. 2:9; Zech. 2:11; 14:11), the nations’ joining Israel as the people of God and making annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship the Lord Almighty as King (Zech. 2:10–12; 14:16–19), removal of the stumbling block of idolatry and false worship (Zech. 5:5–11), global expression of glory for the God of Israel (Zech. 8:20–22; 14:16–19; cf. Mal. 1:11, 14), pervasive holiness unto the Lord that will characterize this

29. See Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, Invitation to the Septuagint (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000). The Pentecost event birthing the church is foreshadowed: the diverse crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem were amazed that they heard the Galileans speaking in their own native language (Acts 2:1–11).
eschatological day (Zech. 14:20–22), and ultimately the vindication of the righteous and the judgment of evildoers (Mal. 3:17–18).

**Between the Testaments**

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen rightly remind us that the movement from the Old Testament to the New Testament was not a giant leap across a chasm of “silent centuries.” Rather, there was an “interlude,” a period of transition, an interval of time for pause and reflection between the first and second testaments. The intertestamental era is such a bridge, or segue, from the old covenant to the new covenant—from Malachi to Matthew.

We learn about this era of history from Jewish religious literature of that time, especially a collection of books known in Protestant Christian circles as the Apocrypha. For the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, this literature is considered deuterocanonical, a second canon. In these traditions the books are appended to or interspersed within the Old Testament. Apart from the canonical debate of the limits or expansiveness of the Old Testament, the literature reminds us there was still a people of God worshiping during this “interlude.”

The books of the Apocrypha reference an array of worship responses. We find mentions of pilgrimages to Jerusalem and festival worship (Tob. 1:6; 5:14); prayer (Sir. 7:14; 28:2); repentance and confession, including fasting (Jdt. 4:10–14); music and singing, including praise hymns and new psalmody (1 Macc. 4:24, 54; Sir. 50:18–21); temple worship (Jdt. 16:16–18; 1 Esd. 5:50–53); and Sabbath keeping (2 Macc. 8:27). The Apocrypha recognizes that personal devotion to God is rooted in obedience to the Torah of Moses and is essential for proper worship (4 Macc. 5:24). The fear of the Lord (Sir. 1:11–20; 7:29–31) and a right heart are also accorded prominence in the worship of God (Sir. 1:12; 21:6; 38:10).

One apocryphal book important for biblical worship studies is Tobit. This anonymous Jewish literary work was probably written between 200 and 170 BC. The book is usually classified as a moralizing short story. Tobit offers a window into Jewish daily life and religion just before the New Testament era. Personal spirituality in Tobit is rooted in the fear of the Lord (4:21; 14:2, 6) and is demonstrated by three distinct religious practices: prayer, sometimes

32. See the introduction to “Tobit” in deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 63–84.
combined with fasting, and almsgiving (4:5–11; 12:8–15). In fact, these three acts of piety became known as the “three pillars” of Judaism in later Jewish religious practice. Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–7:29) offers theological commentary on the three pillars of Judaism: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (Matt. 6:1–18). Jesus’s instruction on these spiritual practices serves as one bridge between the worship of the intertestamental era and the New Testament.

Practical Implications for Worship

- The basis for Hebrew worship in the Old Testament is God himself, “the Holy One of Israel” (Ps. 89:18), the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 3:15). God is both the “object” of worship and the “subject” of worship. God receives the worship of humanity because he is supreme among the gods, is sovereign ruler of the cosmos, and graciously established covenant relationship with his people (cf. Ps. 95). God is the subject of worship, which celebrates God’s activity in history as Creator and Redeemer, Provider and Sustainer, Sanctifier and Enabler.

- Worship is a narrative, centered in the exodus event of the Old Testament and the Christ event of the New Testament—the redemptive work of God across the Testaments. The grand story of God’s salvation history is designed to bring a story-shaped liturgy to worship as outlined in Scripture, enacted in Israel, and refocused in the New Testament church.

- Worship is a whole-person response to God (Deut. 6:4–5; 11:13), a lifestyle of loving obedience and loyal service in gratitude for God’s mercies: this is true worship (Rom. 12:1–2 NIV). Worship is an action verb; it

33. The idea of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting as the three pillars of Jewish piety in later Judaism is an adaptation of the Jewish tradition that the world rests on three pillars: the knowledge of the Torah, the worship of God, and works of charity (deeds of lovingkindness to others); cf. George F. Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 1:35; 2:162–79.

34. Block, For the Glory of God, 29–53.


tells and enacts the Christ event in celebration of Jesus the Messiah. This type of worship is distilled in offerings of sacrifices of praise to God and sacrifices of doing good for others (Heb. 13:15–16). God still looks at the heart of the worshiper, not at outward appearances and ritual forms (1 Sam. 16:7; Ps. 51:16–17; Isa. 57:15; 66:2).

- At one level, worship is spiritual warfare. God’s redemptive work defeats the enemy, Satan, and all the powers of sin and death (Rev. 20:7–15). In the Old Testament this is seen in the judgment brought against the gods of ancient Egypt and Canaan (cf. Exod. 12:12; 18:11; 1 Kings 18:36–40). In the New Testament this is recognized in the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Messiah—Christ the victor over sin and death (cf. 1 Cor. 15:50–57). Walter Brueggemann concurs, declaring that worship is spiritual warfare: “The act of praise is indeed world-making for the community which takes the act of worship as serious and realistic. . . . Worship is not only constitutive, but inevitably polemical. Praise [of Christ] insists [that] not only is this the true world, but that other worlds are false. . . . The church sings praises not only toward God but against the gods.”

- Worship that is transparent and genuine makes a place for the use of the psalms in the liturgy. These prayers of the people of God still have currency for the doxology of the church. Not only praise and thanksgiving but also lament, the honest doubts and righteous complaints of the faithful. The “lament” must not be confused with the “lamentation.” The lamentation is an expression of grief over a calamity that is not reversible (e.g., a funeral dirge). The lament is an appeal to God’s compassion to intervene and change a desperate situation. The lament may be an individual or community prayer, and each has a distinctive structure. Laments are praise offered in a “minor key” in the confidence that God is faithful and in anticipation of a new lease on life.

- Worship is covenantal. A covenant creates relationships. The loving-kindness of God (Heb. ḥesed), a core attribute of his identity (Exod. 34:6–7), is made tangible in his declaration “I will be your God” (promise), and “you will be my people” (obligation) (Jer. 7:23 NIV; cf. Exod. 20:6). Robert E. Webber, Worship Is a Verb (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 43–64.


6:7). The people of Israel received a new identity as God’s chosen people, holy nation, and kingdom of priests through God’s covenant initiative (Exod. 19:5–6). The Sinai covenant is regulated by the law of love (Deut. 6:5; 11:1). Likewise, the new covenant in Christ (Luke 22:13–23) established a unique relational identity for Jesus’s followers as children of God (John 1:12–13), sons and daughters of the Father, the Lord Almighty (2 Cor. 6:17; cf. Gal. 4:6–7). This new and better covenant is also regulated by the law of love: the love of God with our whole being, and the love of neighbor as ourselves (cf. Matt. 22:34–40). 

All this, and more, informs the New Testament understanding of the Old Testament as preparatory history for the coming of Jesus the Messiah (Gal. 3:24). The Old Testament is also a worship primer, a shadow of the good things to come in Christ (Heb. 10:1). The First Testament is preparation for the worship of God in Spirit and truth (John 4:23–24). God is Spirit, to whom his people offer worship energized, informed, and enabled by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9–16; 12:3). God is worshiped in truth, the truth that “Jesus is Lord” (Acts 2:36; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). This is the foundational Christian tenet, the mystery of Jesus the Messiah as fully human and fully divine, the very Son of God (cf. 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 22:16). So come, worship the Lord with gladness! (Ps. 100:2).

For Further Reading
