

What is Worship?

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Worship in the biblical sense is about more than inwardly honoring God. In the following, we compare the common understanding of worship with the biblical concept. We answer the question why God should be worshiped and what promises are associated with it. We give several biblical examples of worshipping God. Regarding the worship in the future, we cite biblical prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled. We conclude with additional comments and a brief summary.

What is meant by worship nowadays?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, worship is

- (i) reverence offered a divine being or supernatural power or
- (ii) a form of religious practice with its creed and ritual or
- (iii) extravagant respect or admiration for or devotion to an object of esteem.

Synonyms to worship are adulation, deification, idolatry and idolization.

Worshipping means

- (i) to honor or show reverence for as a divine being or supernatural power or
- (ii) to regard with great or extravagant respect, honor or devotion.

Synonyms are to adore, to deify, to glorify, to revere, to reverence or to venerate.

The concept of worship in the Bible

When we read about worship in the Old Testament, there is usually the verb “shachah” written in Hebrew. This word means to bow down or to prostrate oneself; it describes an action with the body.

Let’s look at the following verse as an example. Abraham was on his way to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering.

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.” (Gen 22:5)¹

As usual the Hebrew word “shachah” has been translated with “to worship”. A literal translation would be:

...I and the boy will go over there and bow down and come again to you.

In the New Testament the Greek verb “proskuneó” is usually translated with “to workship”. This verb also means to fall down or to prostrate oneself to adore on one’s knees. The word describes a purely physical action of obeisance.

“proskuneó” is composed from the words “pros” (towards) and “kyneo” (to kiss). It was also used to describe the common practice of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his robe or the ground.

¹ The biblical citations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless stated otherwise. Accentuations were added and omissions marked with “...”.

When the King James Bible had first been published in 1611, kneeling down was certainly a natural part of worship. Over the course of time, however, it has changed what people understand by worship.

In the following, the term worship is always used in the sense of “shachah” or “proskuneó”, that is, in the sense of kneeling or bowing down.

Why should we worship God?

There are several instructions in the Old Testament to worship God, for example:

- Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness. (Ps 29:2)
- Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! (Ps 95:6)
- Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth! (Ps 96:9)
- Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! (Ps 99:5)

See also Deut 26:10; 2 Ki 17:36; 2 Ki 18:22; 1 Chr 16:29; 2 Chr 32:12; Ps 66:4; Ps 86:9; Ps 97:7; Ps 99:9; Ps 132:7; Isa 36:7; Isa 45:23; Zeph 2:11.

Jesus said:

- ...You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve. (Mt 4:10; Lk 4:8)
- ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (Jn 4:23+24)

Jesus taught that God seeks people who bow down or kneel before him; and this should be done in spirit and truth.

Paul and Timothy wrote about Jesus:

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, (Phil 2:9+10)

Before Jesus all should go down on their knees, all in heaven and on and even under the earth. This includes all of us.

God promised the following:

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (Jam 4:10)

The Greek verb “tapeinoó” translated as “to humble” also means to make low. Thus, this verse can be translated as follows:

be made low before the LORD, and He will exalt you. (Jam 4:10 LSV)

Jesus said:

...whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Mt 23:12; see also Lk 14:11; Lk 18:14)

When you kneel before God, you humble yourself before him.

It is also written:

The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life. (Prov 22:4; see also Prov 15:33; Prov 18:12)

The Hebrew noun “anavah” (humility) is derived from the verb “anah,” which means to be bowed down or afflicted.

Examples of worshipping God

There are several reports of how God was worshiped:

- The elders of the Israelites bowed down and worshiped, after Moses had performed the signs after his return to Egypt and they had heard that God was concerned about them and had seen their misery. (Exod 4:31)
- Moses prostrated himself when he humbled himself before God because of the sins of the Israelites. (Deut 9:18+25)
- Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped the “commander of the army of the Lord”, presumably Jesus. (Jos 5:14)
- Manoah and his wife fell on their faces to the ground when they saw the angel of the Lord, that is Jesus. (Judg 13:20; see my article “Who is the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament?”)
- David humbled himself before God also by lying down on the ground after he recognized his sin of adultery and murder. (2 Sam 12:16)
- Solomon knelt with hands outstretched toward heaven when the temple was set apart to God (1 Ki 8:54; 2 Chr 6:13); Ezra prayed in the same way (Ezra 9:5).
- Elijah bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees before it rained again after several years. (1 Ki 18:42)
- Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshiping the Lord, after they had heard that they will not need to fight in battle, but that God will fight on their behalf. (2 Chr 20:17+18)
- Ezekiel fell on his face several times when he had an encounter with God. (Ezek 3:23; Ezek 11:13; Ezek 43:3; Ezek 44:4)
- Daniel got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before God. (Dan 6:11)
- When Ezra opened the book of the law of Moses, all the people stood up. And Ezra praised God, and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” and they bowed down and worshiped God with their faces to the ground. (Neh 8:5+6)
- The Israelites confessed their sins and bowed themselves to God after the book of God’s law had been read. (Neh 9:3)

Additional reports of worshipping God are found in the Old Testament in Gen 24:26; Gen 24:48; Gen 24:52; Exod 12:27; Exod 34:8; Num 22:31; Judg 7:15; 1 Sam 1:3; 1 Sam 1:19; 1 Sam 1:28; 1 Sam 15:31; 2 Sam 12:20; 1 Chr 29:20; 2 Chr 7:3; 2 Chr 29:28–30; Neh 9:6; Job 1:20; Ps 5:8; Ps 22:27+29; Ps 72:11; Ps 138:2; Isa 27:13; Jer 7:2; Jer 26:2; Ezek 46:2+3.

In the Gospels we can often read that Jesus was worshiped, that is, that people fell down before him, for example:

And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Mt 14:33)

See also Mt 2:11; Mt 8:2; Mt 9:18; Mt 15:25; Mt 17:14; Mt 20:20; Mt 28:9; Mt 28:17; Mk 1:40; Mk 3:11; Mk 5:6; Mk 5:22; Mk 5:33; Mk 7:25; Mk 10:17; Lk 5:8; Lk 5:12; Lk 8:28; Lk 8:41; Lk 8:47; Lk 17:16; Lk 24:52; Jn 9:38; Jn 11:32.

Jesus himself honored his Father in heaven in this way:

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Mt 26:39; see also Mk 14:35; Lk 22:41)

In the book of Acts it is reported several times that people knelt before God also in the time after Jesus’ ascension, for example:

But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. (Acts 9:40)

See also Acts 7:60; Acts 20:36; Acts 21:5; 1 Cor 14:25; Eph 3:14.

Worship in the future

Zechariah’s following prophecy is still to be fulfilled:

¹⁶ Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. ¹⁷ And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them. (Zech 14:16+17)

Isaiah prophesied:

²² ‘As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,’ declares the Lord, ‘so will your name and descendants endure. ²³ From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,’ says the Lord. (Isa 66:22+23 NIV)

So, in the future, when God will have created the new heavens and the new earth, he will be worshiped regularly by bowing down (Hebrew “shachah”).

In the book of Revelation, it is often written that people fall down before God, for example:

- ⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever... (Rev 4:9+10)
- And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (Rev 5:8)

See also Rev 5:14; Rev 7:11; Rev 11:1; Rev 11:16; Rev 13:8; Rev 14:7; Rev 15:4; Rev 19:4; Rev 22:9.

Conclusion

You can praise God and pray to him without kneeling down or taking any other position with your body. Alternatively hands were lifted up in order to pray or to praise God (Gen 14:22; 2 Chr 6:13; Neh 8:6; Ps 134:2; Lam 2:19; Lam 3:41); by the way, hands were also lifted up to bless people (Exod 17:11+12; Lev 9:22; Lk 24:50). In the gospels it is also mentioned that people prayed standing (Mt 6:5; Lk 18:11+13).

When we read about worship in the Bible, people usually went down on their knees or prostrated themselves before God. God always wanted to be honored in this way. It was like this in the Old and also in the New Testament times. In the same way, God wants to be worshiped by us in our present time, and he will demand this in the future as well.

Of course it is important that we bow down wholeheartedly and in spirit and truth. When we kneel before God, we humble ourselves and we will be exalted by him.

As we have seen above, the biblical concept of worship is different to today's common parlance. Ultimately, it is not particularly important if in our daily usage we mean by worshiping to honor God inwardly or if we mean to bow down. It is much more important that we do God's will.

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