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# WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT



Phillip McMillion

Meaningful worship is what all Christians seek when they worship God. But what is “meaningful” worship, and what makes it so? Where do we turn to find guidance for making our worship more meaningful? In his study *Worship in Ancient Israel*, H. H. Rowley wrote, “The real meaning of worship derives in the first place from the God to whom it is directed.”<sup>1</sup> When we begin to consider worship from a biblical point of view, we must begin first and foremost with God—his presence and his nature. Our worship should focus on God, not on humanity. We worship God in accordance with who he is, not what we want or like. Marva J. Dawn makes a similar point in her book *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* when she writes, “In genuine worship God is the subject—and we are not.”<sup>2</sup>

If our worship is to be determined by God’s nature, then perhaps it is important to look at a few aspects of that nature. It is difficult to focus on God’s nature in isolation since his nature is revealed in his acts, but a few aspects of God’s nature are especially relevant to worship.

## God’s Nature

*God is holy.* In Lev 11:44–45 and in 19:1, God proclaims his holiness and says that his people must also be holy. After Joshua challenged the people to choose the Lord (Josh 24:14–15), he went on to voice a warning: since

God is holy, serving him is not to be taken lightly (vv.19–20). A commitment to God is serious, and can even be dangerous if it is not honored. God is holy in a unique and special way. In 1 Sam 2:2 we find, “There is none holy like the Lord.” What does all this mean? It means that Israel recognized that there was something unique and different about their God. God is separate from the common things of everyday life. Rudolf Otto aptly described the God of Scripture as “wholly other.”<sup>3</sup>

Now, the question for us is, does God’s holiness have any relevance for our worship? Are there ways in which our worship recognizes the otherness of God? Do we have a sense of awe and respect before a holy God? In Isaiah 6 the seraphim in the presence of God proclaim, “Holy, holy, holy.” One of our concerns today is to make our assemblies inviting, friendly, and non-threatening. Perhaps, at the same time, we should be careful that we do not make them common. We need to remember that we are worshipping a holy God, and that worship is therefore different from most other activities in our modern world.

*God is a jealous God.* The Ten Commandments prohibit for Israel the worship of other gods because the Lord is “a jealous God” (Exod 20:5). Exod 34:14 goes so far as to say that God’s name is Jealous. That characteristic may sound a bit strange to our modern world. In our society, jealousy is not considered a virtue; it is often seen as the opposite of tolerance and open-mindedness. In the Old

Testament, however, jealousy is one of the positive characteristics of God. What does the Bible mean in calling God jealous? It means that God is unique and that he demands a unique and single-minded dedication to him. Even in our modern society, there is a healthy kind of jealousy that we can understand. If a husband notices someone paying undue attention to his wife, it is healthy and normal for him to be concerned. In fact, if he shows no concern at all, that might be a sign of a serious problem. There are times when some jealousy is good and right; that is the sense in which it is used in the Scripture. Jealousy is a sign of God's love for his people and his desire for a unique relationship with them.

Are there ways in which our worship should reflect God's jealousy? There are many things that may call for our allegiance in the modern world, but they must never be on the same level as our dedication to God. We may be dedicated to our political parties, to the PTO at school, to our service clubs, or even to our sports teams. As Christians, however, we must realize that our commitment to God is on a much deeper level. Do our lives reflect that distinction in our actions, our thoughts, and our use of our time and resources? Does our worship reflect the uniqueness of our commitment to God?

*God is steadfast in love.* In both Exod 34:6–7 and Num 14:18–19, God is described as abounding in “steadfast love,” or, in Hebrew, *hesed*. The word does not mean romantic love; rather, it signifies a love based on a decision or a covenant. It suggests that the Lord is constant and reliable and that he will keep his promises to his people. This term for God's steadfast love is used more than 170 times in the Old Testament, and of those uses, more than 120 are found in the Psalms. That is significant to our discussion since psalms played an important role in the worship of ancient Israel. By studying the Psalms, we can learn some of the things that were important in Israel's worship. That, in turn, can help us to focus on what should be important in our own worship today. The frequent use of the term “steadfast love” in the Psalms suggests that Israel's worship was, at least in part, a response to God's steadfast love. God was a God who would keep his promises; because of that, his people were drawn to worship him.

How might our worship reflect God's steadfast love? Surely, in this age of change and uncertainty, God's nature as reliable and trustworthy is something that people need to see. Perhaps we need to return to the use of psalms

that express confidence in God as one who is steadfast in love and mercy. There is a balance between the love of God and God's holiness. The challenge for us is to maintain both elements in our worship to the Lord.

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## The question for us is, does God's holiness have any relevance for our worship?

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### God's Acts

One of the ways that the Old Testament maintained a balanced view of God was through remembering what he had done for his people. When God called Abraham and led him, God showed his love and protection. When he kept his covenant with Abraham, he showed his steadfast love. God also showed his majesty and power, however, when he sent the plagues on the Egyptians and delivered Israel at the Red Sea. The memory of what God had done for his people was crucial, and it inspired them to respond to him in worship.

In many of the psalms, there is an emphasis on telling and re-telling what God has done for his people. That story was to be preserved and taught to each new generation in order that they might also understand and appreciate all that the Lord had done. When they remembered the Lord's actions, future generations would also respond with gratitude and praise. That is clearly seen in Psalm 105. The psalm opens with a call to give thanks to the Lord. For what were they to give thanks? For his deeds, his wonderful works, and his miracles, as seen in verses 1–5. The largest part of Psalm 105 contains a summary of the deeds that God has done. Verses 7–15 review the covenant that God made with the Patriarchs. Verses 16–25 recount God's work through Joseph and through Israel's oppression in Egypt. The plagues on the Egyptians are reviewed in verses 26–36. Then verses 37–42 relate the great deliverance by God at the Exodus and his care for Israel in the Wilderness. Verses 43–44 tell of the people's rejoicing at their inheritance of the new land. The final line returns to the theme of praise to the Lord. Psalm 105 calls on God's people to praise him, but it also teaches them what God

has done. Why did they praise God? Because of all that God had already done for them. The works of God were not viewed as ancient history that was of no importance to the present generation. God's work was taught over and over again to each new generation as a crucial part of their heritage.

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## We can look to the Psalms as a guide for the expression of the different moods and themes of our worship.

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If ancient Israel was to praise God for what he had done, it was crucial that they know the story of those great deeds. Now, how does that apply to us? Since we are indeed God's people, then that heritage of God's works is also our heritage. If it was important for ancient Israel to know the story in order to properly worship and praise God, can it be any less important for us today? How can we worship God if we do not know the great things that he has done? Ancient Israel came to worship God with grateful hearts full of thanksgiving and emotion—but that emotion was based on a knowledge of what he had done.

In our modern world, there is often little appreciation of the past. We must be careful not to let this attitude destroy our appreciation for the wonderful work of God. We must teach new Christians both what God has done, and that it was done for them. And as God's people, we ourselves must remember what God has done so that we can praise him with grateful hearts. The joy, thankfulness, and emotion of our worship should always be grounded in our understanding and remembrance of what God has done for us. Perhaps the use of psalms such as Psalms 105, 106, and 136 will help us to appreciate the importance of knowing God's history.

### Moods and Themes in Worship

Worship services can have very different moods and themes—celebration at the completion of a major building project, hopeful anticipation at the sending of a new

missionary team, mourning at the loss of a beloved member. The many different themes and styles of the Psalms reflect the mood and emphasis of different worship settings in ancient Israel. A study of the different types of psalms gives us a biblical guide for our different occasions of worship.

*Lament.* The type of psalm found most frequently in the Old Testament is the lament. That may seem strange to us if we think of laments as mournful dirges—we usually want our worship to be upbeat and positive. Part of the problem may be our misconception of the biblical lament. The laments of the book of Psalms do express mourning and sorrow, and that sorrow can be intense. But they rarely end in sorrow. The laments mourn over trouble, but they go on to express confidence that God is able to deliver from trouble. Laments often end with a note of confidence and praise for the deliverance that God will surely provide.

Psalm 13 is a good example of the lament. Here the psalmist cries out to God, "How long, O Lord: Will you forget me forever?" He is in pain and sorrow. Then, in verses 3–4, the writer asks for God's help and prays for deliverance. The psalm ends, in verses 5–6, with an expression of confidence and trust in the Lord, who will deal bountifully with the psalmist.

We might ask why so many laments are included in our book of Psalms. According to some counts, almost half of the psalms in the present book are laments. If we consider the way life often goes, however, perhaps the laments simply reflect the reality of the way life unfolds. In the life of any faithful community, there are often times of grief and sorrow. The laments are a reflection of where people really live. That was true in ancient times, and it is just as true today. The use of laments in worship can help us to find ways to express our sorrow and to begin the process of healing. There are times when we need to cry together just as much as we need to laugh together. Both are important, and the Psalms can give us guidance in making even our times of mourning meaningful by drawing us closer to God and closer to each other.

One key feature of biblical laments is that they usually do not end with complaint. The psalmist might complain bitterly of his trouble, but he holds on to his faith in God. He works through his complaint and comes out of it expressing trust in God, who will heal and deliver. In our worship today, we can find in the laments the words to express our sorrow and grief. At the same time, we can

find in them the expression of faith that will help us to work through the trials and come out with a confidence in God that is intact and strong. Such use of the Psalms in our worship can be a source of real blessing for the church today.

*Confidence.* The Psalms express confidence—that God’s people will be delivered, that evil will be defeated. Their confidence, however, is in the power of the Lord. It is never in the power of the believing community as a worldly or political force. The community can be confident, but only through the power of God. There is a lesson for the church here. We too can express confidence that evil will be defeated, but certainly never because of our own power, or skill, or cunning. As the church grows in its understanding of the power of politics and of the use of the media, there is a great temptation to rely on our own abilities. A focus on the psalms of confidence, such as Psalm 16 or Psalm 121, might help us to avoid that temptation.

*Petition.* In our worship, and especially in our prayers, petition plays a major role. There are a number of psalms of petition, such as Psalm 12 and Psalm 80. In those psalms, the writers pray for deliverance or for protection from enemies, but it is interesting to notice what they do not request. The psalmists ask for spiritual comfort, for deliverance from evil, but they do not ask for God to give them material things. Perhaps that should give some insight into how we should pray. It is normal and right for us to take our concerns and petitions to the Lord. At the same time, however, we should balance those petitions with praise and thanksgiving. When our prayers become primarily a series of requests for what we want God to do for us, then perhaps they have lost a sense of balance. The use of the Psalms as our model might help us recover the balance suggested by the Scriptures.

## Summary

The Old Testament does not give us an exact blueprint of the worship of ancient Israel. Scripture does, however, contain some important principles that can help us in structuring our worship. Our worship must always focus on God. It should be a response of gratitude for what the Lord has done. We can look to the Psalms as a guide for the expression of the different moods and themes of our worship.

People come to worship seeking many different things. Some come seeking encouragement and strength to face life’s problems. Others come seeking a deeper sense of spirituality. Still others come seeking a new—or renewed—relationship with God. All of those concerns have their place, but none should become our primary emphasis. If we focus on worship, praise, and thankfulness to God as the Scriptures suggest, all of our needs will be met.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 251.

<sup>2</sup>Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 76.

<sup>3</sup>Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 25–30.