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ISRAEL'S WORSHIP AND OURS: THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE

By Paul Watson

The centrality of worship for biblical faith may often be overlooked, but it cannot be denied. Creation itself culminated, not in the formation of humanity, but in the sanctification of a certain day on which humanity and all creation honors the Creator (Gen. 2:1-4; Exod. 20:8-11). Immediately after the flood, Noah worshipped (Gen. 8:20-22); and immediately after his arrival in Canaan, Abraham did the same (Gen. 12:7-8). The covenant at Sinai was made during a worship service (Exod. 19:24). The worship of God both preceded (Josh. 3-5) and followed (Josh. 24) the conquest of Canaan. The central architectural wonder of Judaism — the Temple in Jerusalem — was built (1 Kings 5-8), repaired (2 Kings 22-23), rebuilt (Hag. 1-2) and cleansed (Mark 11:15-19) for the pure worship of God. Worship surrounded the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 1:12-14 and 2:41-47) and awaits the eternal congregation of God's people (Rev. 22:3).

If worship is so central, so important for both Israel and the church, what is its primary focus or goal? In other words, why is worship so important in the life of God's people? That question is being addressed throughout this issue of *Leaven*. Here let me propose the following answer: Above all else, worship is the fundamental way for us to approach a unique and holy God.

God's Transcendence in the Old Testament

The place to start in explicating this answer should be where Israel started: with the

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absolute transcendence of Jehovah. As Genesis 1:1-2:4 makes abundantly clear, God is solely responsible for creation; but he is in no way a part of it and is not to be confused or identified with it. He is 'over against' the world; thus nothing in the world may be used to represent his likeness (The Second Commandment; Exod. 20:4-6). Similarly, God is distinct from his people, either as individuals or as a community. God is responsible for the very existence of Israel as a nation, as the Exodus-story proclaims (Exod. 1-15; 20:2); they are "his people" and he is "their God" (Exod. 6:7). But God is not "personified" or "embodied" by Israel. He remains distinct from them and calls, rebukes, blesses, punishes and delivers them from without. Even God's greatest servants within Israel must keep their distance from him, e.g. Moses (Exod. 3:1-6; 33:17-23) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-18). No one can capture God (cf. Gen. 32:22-32). Nor does any individual have the right or the power to manipulate God through the use of his name (The Third Commandment; Exod. 20:7).

Above all, God is to be differentiated from all other "gods," who in fact turn out to be "no-gods" (The First Commandment; Exod. 20:3). Jehovah God is not one among many; Jehovah God is unique (Deut. 6:4). By virtue of such uniqueness, Jehovah God transcends all human limits (Ps. 139:7-12), all human thought (Is. 55:8-9). While he may choose to reveal himself to us, even to enter into the most intimate relationships with us, God always remains at least to some degree "hidden,"¹ "the great stranger in the human world."²

The Holy Otherness of God

Closely linked with God's transcendence is his absolute holiness; indeed, they come close to being the same thing. 'Holiness' defines both God's own existence and his expectations for Israel: "You shall be holy; for I Yahweh your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). Isaiah's favorite name for

God is "The Holy One of Israel" (Is. 1:4, etc.).

God's holiness is, in part, His mysterious, awesome power that transcends human understanding and brooks no comparison: "Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Exod. 15:11 cf. 1 Sam. 2:2)³ Such power, which cannot be comprehended or contained, is the one appropriate object of human fear (Is. 8:11-15; Deut. 7:21).⁴

God's holiness also has an ethical dimension: "it is the awesome contrast between God's purity and man's sin."⁵ Thus Joshua warns Israel, "You cannot serve the LORD; for he is a holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins" (Josh. 24:19). This is precisely how Isaiah encountered God in his vision of God in the temple. Isaiah heard the seraphim say, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts"; and Isaiah's most appropriate response was,

"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips; and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Is. 6:3,5).

Israel's Response To God's Wholly Otherness

In spite of her 'distance' from God, Israel is nevertheless summoned to approach God in worship. God invites Israel into his presence and seeks from her an appropriate response to his 'holy otherness'. In such worship Israel is able to acknowledge God's majestic transcendence and her own subservience to and dependence upon him: "Know that the LORD is God! It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). As G.H. Davies puts it,

Israelite worship centers on Israel's God. He is the author of sacrifice (Lev. 17:11) and of Israel's system of worship. He both gives grace and glory and receives worship and glory. True Israelite worship is dominated by enthusiasm for God.⁶

In such worship Israel is also able to claim God's goodness and holiness: "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation" (Ps. 68:5; cf. 100:5). Thus,

Worship is holy meeting. In worship, man enters into the sphere of holiness,

into the presence of the Holy One. Israel was born in the hour of the covenant to be a holy nation or people. In her worship she remembers God's self-witness, "I, the Lord, am holy," and to it she responds confessionally, "The Lord our God is holy" (Ps. 99)...In the cult, Israel remembers the holy past, and in the spoken recital it becomes present, for in truth it was meant for every present.

The first word that Israel utters in her response to a transcendent God is a word of praise: "Hallelujah." Israel is invited first and foremost to celebrate God's majestic goodness: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, bless his name!" (Ps. 100:4). Other appropriate responses cluster around this initial response — confession, thanksgiving, petition, reflection — but praise comes first:

It is appropriate to address God in need, by way of petition and intercession. But address in need occurs in a context of lyrical submission in which God is addressed not because we have need, but simply because God is God and we are summoned to turn our lives in answer to God. It is appropriate that we should address God in submission. It is inap-

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appropriate that God should not be addressed. This is a God who evokes address of gratitude and awe, simply because of who God is.⁸

Nor is such praise limited to Israel's hymn-book, the Psalms; such doxologies and hymns are sung at the Sea (Exod. 15:1-18) and at Shiloh (1 Sam. 2:1-10) by David (2 Sam. 22:1-51) and by the prophets (e.g. Amos 4:13, 5:8-9, 9:5-6).

Such praise, however, must be holy

praise. Israel, of course, cannot duplicate God's holiness, but she must acknowledge and practice it; otherwise her praise is in vain. Time and time again the prophets rebuke the futile attempts at holy worship by an unholy people: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight

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in your solemn assemblies....but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24; cf. Isaiah 1:12-17; Jeremiah 7:1-15; and Isaiah 58:1-14).

Holy Praise Of The 'Holy Other' In The New Testament

This same essential understanding of worship — the full surrender of a people who would be holy to the transcendent lordship of a God who is by definition holy — is reaffirmed in the New Testament. The story of Jesus' encounter with the 'rich young ruler' (Mark 10:17-22) is particularly instructive here. First, the matter of transcendent goodness or holiness must be settled: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (v.18). Then our human responsibility for imitating that goodness must be examined, not only for our omission of crimes (vv. 19-20) but also for our commission of mercies (v. 21). Then, and only then, may we inquire about "eternal life" (v.17).

Other passages that emphasize God's majestic, exclusive transcendence include the third temptation of Jesus and his unequivocal response to Satan, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Matt. 4:8-10, quoting Deut. 6:13) and the admonition of Heb. 12:28-29:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.

That our worship must be holy worship is stressed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount — "leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother" (Matt. 5:24) — and in his denunciation of the Pharisees for their abrogation of the Fifth Commandment (Matt. 15:1-9, quoting Is. 29:13) and for being ritually scrupulous but morally unscrupulous (Matt. 23:23-26). Paul will put it this way in Rom. 12:1: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Our Worship Of God Today

It is no less crucial that our worship today should center upon Jehovah God and his majestic holiness. We have been invited by Christ to call upon God as "Father"; we have also been reminded that he is the Father "who art in heaven" and that His name is to be forever "hallowed" (Matt. 6:9). "Reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:28) remain the appropriate way of approaching the transcendent Creator and Lord.

Such God-centered worship automatically takes priority over other approaches and emphases. These would include worship which focuses on manipulating the feelings of the worshipper; worship which has some utilitarian goal (e.g., raising money or enlisting support for some church project); worship which is narrowly conversionistic; worship which is primarily instructional; or worship which seeks to promote fellowship and 'closeness' among the worshippers. Any or all of these things may take place in, or be the outcome of, our submissive celebration of God's Lordship. I may well be 'moved', motivated, taught, converted, and/or drawn closer to other Christians in the context of, or as a result of, my worship of Jehovah God. But none of these is "the reason I come to church," not the primary reason, the "real reason." God alone summons me, confronts me, forgives me and blesses me as I assemble with his people to worship him.

As our worship today must still be God-centered, it must also still be 'holy worship'. My holiness will be both pre-condition and result of my worship. I will still make things right with my brother before I lay my gift on the altar. As a result of my 'holy meeting' with God, I will be enabled to practice that "pure and undefiled" religion which is "to visit orphans and widows in

their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (Jas. 1:27). We are truly 'summoned to worship, dismissed to serve.' "True worship both enjoins and equips Christians to reflect God's righteousness, compassion, and justice — both in the church and in the world."⁹

To make the celebration of God's transcendent holiness the purpose and goal of our worship will ultimately lead to the enrichment of our relationship with him. Praise reminds me both of who I am and who he is, thus fostering both the orientation and the integration of my life before the One who "holds the whole world in His hands." Such praise protects me from idolatry. To confess the uniqueness of God is to deny the reality of any and every 'deity' that would compete for my allegiance. And such praise invites me to live in hope, for when I explicitly acknowledge the Creator, I also implicitly entrust my future to Him (see Heb. 11:1-3 and Rom. 8:18-39). In sum,

Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community; indeed, of all creation. Yes, all of life is aimed toward God and finally exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are. Praise is not only a human requirement and a human need, it is also a human delight. We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy.¹⁰

Notes

¹ B.W. Anderson, "God, OT View of," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. II, p. 419.

² G. von Rad, Old Testament Theology, vol. I, p. 205.

³ On the concept of God's holiness as 'highness' or majesty, see further C. Westermann, A Thousand Years and a Day, pp. 220-222.

⁴ On 'fear' as the first (but not only) appropriate response of man to God, see H. Ringgren, Israelite Religion, pp. 126-127.

⁵ Anderson, p. 424b.

⁶ G.H. Davies, "Worship in the OT," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. IV, p. 883a. Note further that the primary words for worship - "to serve" (Heb. 'bd, Grk. latreia) and

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"to prostrate oneself" (Heb. hsthwh, Grk. proskunein) - vividly depict this response of submissive acknowledgement of God's Lordship.

⁷ Muilenburg, The Way of Israel, pp. 108-109.

⁸ W. Brueggemann, Israel's Praise, p. 1.

⁹ C.L. Allen, R.T. Hughes, M.R. Weed, The Worldly Church, p. 78. See further their full prescription for "a worshipping people," pp. 77-79.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *ibid*.