

## *‘Public Worship’ in the Old Covenant*

The history of ‘worship’ goes back a long way. Even before God formed Israel into a nation and gave them his covenant and its law at Sinai, men ‘worshipped’ him. As far back as Genesis 3, ‘Abel offered to God [an] acceptable sacrifice’ (Heb. 11:4), and by the time we get to Genesis 4:26, men had begun to ‘call on the name of the LORD’. We know that Noah built an altar (Gen. 8:20) – as did Abram, when he called ‘upon the name of the LORD’ (Gen. 12:7-8). Abraham, receiving his change of name when God told him of the covenant he would make with him through the birth of a son, ‘fell on his face’ (Gen. 17:3,17), and, in his willingness to obey God – even to the extent of sacrificing that son – he ‘worshipped’ God (Gen. 22:5), building an ‘altar’ (Gen. 22:9). Abraham’s servant ‘worshipped’ (Gen. 24:26,48,52). Job, when he learned of the disasters that had fallen upon his family and estate, ‘worshipped’ God (Job. 1:20). These early episodes give us invaluable clues as to what is involved in ‘worship’: submission, adoration, obedience, gratitude, falling down before, and so on. And Jacob (knowingly or otherwise) followed his grandfather’s example (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:4,18) by adding the concept of a special – not to say, holy – ‘place’ when he venerated Bethel as the ‘house of God’, and God confirmed his decision (Gen. 28:17,22; 35:1-15).

But it is with God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt, with his giving of the Mosaic covenant and its law to his people at Sinai, that our exploration of ‘worship’ – ‘public worship’, in particular – must begin.

Because Israel was playing a vital role in God’s purpose in the history of redemption through covenants,<sup>1</sup> God wanted his people to be separate from all the nations – their separation from all others being vital to God’s purpose. And nowhere was that

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Redemption*.

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mark of separation more evident than in Israel's 'worship'. Let us consider how God made this clear to his people.

But before we come to that, it is essential to realise that God demanded more than occasional acts of 'worship' from Israel. By redeeming them from the slavery<sup>2</sup> of Egypt (something God never let his people forget) (Deut. 5:6; 6:12,21; 7:8; 8:14; 13:5,10; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18,22; 26:6, for instance), he had made the people of Israel his own slaves to 'serve' him (Deut. 6:13; 10:12 – 11:32) by yielding a willing lifetime of exclusive obedience to his covenant and its law, day in and day out, thus glorifying him – and him alone – in everything (Josh. 22:5).<sup>3</sup>

This cannot be overstated: while not denying the importance of the set-piece festivals, 'worship' in Israel was not to be confined to occasional acts. Consequently, in what follows by way of description of 'worship' in Israel, we must not allow ourselves to think only in terms of the 'occasional', something which took place in a special, designated place and carried out in obedience to a set procedure. Rather, we must keep in mind that Israel's 'worship' or 'service' was what God required from every Israelite in everyday life.

But, of course, God did require Israel to observe designated festivals. As for those festivals, the place, the procedure, the liturgy and the times of observance were all sacrosanct. God spelled this out so often that it became second nature to the Israelites, with Mount Zion at Jerusalem as the focal point (Ex. 12:43-49; Deut. 12:5-7; 16:5-6; 1 Kings 8:1-53; Ps. 5:7; 28:2; 55:17; 76:2; 78:67-69; 99:9; 132:13-14; 134:3; 138:2; Dan. 6:10). All was stipulated, regulated, prescribed, ritualised, down to the minutest detail. Even after Pentecost, old habits died hard for those reared in Judaism; the old dates and places were so deeply ingrained in the Jewish psyche, that, in the early days of

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<sup>2</sup> As Jesus made clear in John 8:34 (see also 2 Pet. 2:19), since the fall, all men are born slaves. Jumping ahead, slavery is an integral feature of the new covenant (see Rom. 6:15-23, for instance).

<sup>3</sup> See Peterson pp69-70,72-73.

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the gospel age, they still exercised their power over converted Jews (Acts 3:1; 10:9,30; 12:3; 20:6,16; 1 Cor. 16:8).<sup>4</sup>

Sacrifice was at the heart of Jewish 'worship', as Leviticus makes clear. So what did Christ mean when he told the Jews what God required of them: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' (Matt. 9:13; 12:7), quoting Hosea 6:6? As Albert Barnes put it in his *Commentary*:

'Sacrifices' were the principal part of the 'worship' of the Jews, and hence came to signify 'external worship in general'. This is the meaning of the word here. The sense in which our Saviour applies it is this: 'You Pharisees are exceedingly tenacious of the "external" duties of religion; but God has declared that he prefers benevolence or mercy to those external duties'.

The point is that God did require Israel to observe the set-piece rituals connected with the tabernacle (and, later, the temple), including blood sacrifice, but that was not all; as he made clear in hundreds of commandments (not just ten), daily obedience to the law was essential. While we need to explore the special days of 'worship', we must not forget the everyday aspect.

### ***The cardinal point***

The cardinal point in what follows is that nothing – nothing – could replace Scripture as the rule of all acceptable 'worship' in Israel. The last four books of the Pentateuch puts this beyond doubt. The writer of Hebrews summed it up:

When Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying: 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain' (Heb. 8:5).

And Stephen was able to say:

Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen (Acts 7:44).

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<sup>4</sup> I find the same. I still drop into Christendom-speak: Christmas, 'service', 'going to church', etc.

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Alas, time and again down the centuries which followed the giving of the law, Israel failed miserably at this point; not only did they overlay and obscure God's commands with their rabbinic traditions, they turned to pagan principles and practices, thus adulterating the covenant by their adoption of the ideas of men. And God left them in no doubt about the wrongness of such:

Their fear of me is a commandment taught by men (Isa. 29:13).

Or, in NASB:

Their reverence for me consists of tradition learned.

Or, as Christ put it:

In vain do they 'worship' me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Matt. 15:9).

So what categorical principles did God spell out for Israel's observance of 'public worship' in the days of the old covenant?

### ***'Public worship' was for Israelites only***

'Public worship' was for natural Israelites, being an integral part of the old covenant and its law which was unique to them (Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 9:4-5).

Could no other people participate?

### ***Conversion to Judaism was essential***

No pagan could take part in Israel's 'public worship' unless and until he converted to Judaism (Ex. 12:43-49; 20:10; Lev. 24:22; Num. 9:14; 15:15-16,29, and so on); otherwise he was excluded. Ezra and Nehemiah took the ultimate step in this regard by calling for Israel's separation from pagans, even to the extent of the dissolution of forbidden intermarriage between Jews and pagans (Ezra 9:1 – 10:44; Neh. 13:1-31).

It is clear: conversion to Judaism was essential. No pagan could have any part in the 'public worship' of God.

***But conversion to Judaism was not enough***

Having got that far – the prospective ‘worshipper’ having converted to Judaism (become a proselyte) – the following still had to be borne in mind:

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the LORD would not have listened (Ps. 66:18).

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him (Prov. 15:8).

The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous (Prov. 15:29).

If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination (Prov. 28:9).

Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear (Isa. 59:2).

As the blind man, addressing the Pharisees, speaking in old-covenant terms, put it:

We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is ‘a worshipper’ of God and does his will, God listens to him (John 9:31).

As for the priests, the standard was even higher:

None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD’s food offerings; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the LORD who sanctifies them (Lev. 21:17-23).

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Calvin commented:

The sanctuary of God [was] polluted by any defect or imperfection; and, consequently, that whatever of their own men obtruded upon God, [was] condemned as profane.<sup>5</sup>

As Peterson observed:

A great concern in the levitical law [was] to distinguish between 'the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean' (Lev. 10:10)...<sup>6</sup> Holiness characterises God himself and all that belongs to him, and so he [desired] that his people should consecrate themselves to him and remain holy (*cf.* Lev. 11:44-45:19:2; 20:26). The LORD had brought Israel into a special relationship with himself, setting them apart from the nations to be his own... To maintain this consecrated status,<sup>7</sup> pollution and sin were to be avoided in every aspect of life.<sup>8</sup>

It is impossible to miss God's heavy emphasis throughout the last four books of the Pentateuch, stressing that the children of Israel, in every respect, had to be washed clean when entering the presence of God; 'in every respect' – whether priests, people or the sacrifices to be offered; all had to be 'clean'.<sup>9</sup>

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What's the point? Is all this just a question of history? Far from it! We know all this applied in the days of the old covenant, but what of the new? Should we apply every bit of it – un-nuanced –

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<sup>5</sup> I have put Calvin's words in the past tense. The old covenant, being temporary, and for Israel only, has been fulfilled and rendered obsolete by Christ. My use of the past tense, of course, does not mean that in the new covenant men are free to 'obtrude upon God' 'whatever of their own men' like.

<sup>6</sup> There are many other references to this vital principle and practice; see, for instance, Lev. 11:1-47; 20:25; 21:21; Num. 5:1-4; 9:6-10; 19:11; Deut. 14:3-21; Ezek. 22:26; 44:23, and so on.

<sup>7</sup> I have changed the order of this sentence.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson p40. See previous note.

<sup>9</sup> The exceptions which occurred at Sinai (Num. 9:1-14) and in the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30:17-20) only serve to 'prove (that is, confirm) the rule'.

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to the *ekklēsia*, or not? If we should, how? Are the covenants continuous or discontinuous?