

# CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

## UNIT ONE WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

### DEFINING WORSHIP

- **Worship as homage or grateful submission to God**
  - In the Greek Bible, the word most commonly translated ‘to worship’ (*proskynein*) expressed the custom of bowing down, kissing the feet or the hem of the garment.
  - Applied to pagan gods, it meant bowing down before an image as a literal gesture of homage but also came to represent the inward attitude this gesture represented.
  - In the Old Testament, this gesture expressed surrender or submission to the true and living God, but was only meaningful if it expressed recognition of God’s majesty and holiness.
- **Worship as service to God**
  - Another Greek word used for worship (*latreuein*) is more accurately rendered ‘to serve’. Israel was released from slavery in Egypt for the purpose of serving God.
  - A complex system of sacrifices and rituals was set up by God so that Israel could serve him appropriately at his chosen sanctuary.
  - Some passages set Israel’s service in the broader framework of fearing God – total allegiance to God was required, and bowing down to other gods strictly forbidden.
- **Worship as reverence or respect for God**
  - A final group of terms was used to indicate the fear, reverence and respect due to God.
  - This involved keeping his commandments, obeying his voice, walking in his ways, turning away from evil.
  - Sacrifice and other rituals were a way of expressing reverence, but faithfulness and obedience to his demands in every aspect of life was the distinguishing mark of true religion.

### REVELATION AND REDEMPTION

- **Issues other than terminology must be considered**
  - The Bible makes it clear that worship is only acceptable to God if it is based on a true knowledge of him and his will – this was illustrated at Sinai.

- The regulations which were given were God's special provision for those people whom he had redeemed.
- The Israelites were reminded of how they been separated from the nations, and shown how to express their special status in practical ways (Exodus 19).
- God could only be approached on his terms, or judgement would follow — the Israelites had to trust in Moses as the mediator of God's will and demonstrate that with obedience.
- Israel's relationship with God was not to be mysterious and irrational — it was to be a personal and moral fellowship with the one who had given them the commandments.
- The commandments state the fundamental principles of living in relationship with the God who had brought them out of slavery.
- Exclusive devotion to the God who redeemed them involved avoiding idolatry, sanctifying God's name, observing the Sabbath and also obedience to God in everyday relationships — this was acceptable worship.

## **WORSHIP AND THE CULT**

- Israel, like other nations, had a 'cult' of worship, but a single one which reflected Mosaic law.
- **The Significance of the Tabernacle**
  - Exodus 25-31 gives great importance to the setting up of a sanctuary — the tabernacle, which must be made exactly as God instructed so that he might dwell amongst them.
  - The divine presence was not to be linked to any kind of image, but was to be proclaimed and expressed by this sanctuary.
  - The focal point of the tabernacle was the ark, representing God's words to Israel and therefore his rule over Israel.
  - God promised to meet Moses and give his commands for the Israelites 'above the cover between the cherubim that are over the ark of God (Exodus 25:22).
  - The ark-cover with cherubim represented God's throne, and the ark itself was regarded as the 'footstool' of God's throne — God's presence and rule were expressed by placing these in the inner sanctuary, symbolically the throne room.
  - The tabernacle was intended to be a portable expression of God's presence with his people, at the centre of Israel's life on the journey to the promised land.
  - God had promised the Israelites that he would be their God and they would be his people, and so he would be uniquely with them.
  - The tabernacle was to be in the centre of the camp, providing the means by which all of life could be related to God.

- **The Role of the Priests**

- The ordinary Israelite was forbidden to enter the holy place, but could meet with God at the entrance curtain of the tabernacle.
- God consecrated a special priesthood from among the Israelites to enable them to relate to him — the priests' authority came not from the community but from God.
- God consecrated the sanctuary where the priests would operate by allowing his glory to dwell there in the first place, enabling him to continue to reveal himself to his people in his glory.
- The priesthood was a channel for the continual flow of the Word into Israel's life.
- In making his presence known among them through his word, God fulfilled his covenant promise to be 'their God'.

- **Sacred Festivals**

- The Old Testament sets out annual festivals to enable God's people to acknowledge his hand in the fruitfulness of the earth, and celebrated his goodness with sacrifices and feasting.
- The Passover was in due course connected with the barley harvest, the Feast of Weeks celebrated the wheat harvest and Tabernacles was alongside the Feast of the Ingathering.
- These festivals were also related to the saving acts of God by which he brought Israel to himself — reminding Israel how God had revealed himself to them in the great events of their history.
- The Sabbath, a weekly festival, was another sign of the relationship between God as creator and redeemer and Israel as his holy people.
- These festivals are a reminder of extent to which praise and thanksgiving were at the heart of Israelite religion — Old Testament times were not just about sombre atonement for sins.

- **The Pattern of Sacrifice in Israel**

- The sacrificial system was inaugurated with the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood.
- Sin offerings and burnt offerings were made for Aaron and the priesthood, and then for the people, followed by a peace offering.
- The first emphasis was on sins which needed to be forgiven, followed by an expression of personal consecration in the burnt offering.
- Finally, the peace offering could symbolise the restoration of fellowship with God and with others in the community.
- The sin offering and guilt offering reflected the particular concern for dealing with transgressions, to maintain the covenant relationship inaugurated by God.
- Atonement through these offerings is mentioned in connection with both unintentional and deliberate sins — suggesting that the ritual act had no meaning apart from genuine repentance.

- **Cleansing and Sanctification**

- Holiness characterises God himself and so he desired that his people should be ritually or morally holy and distinct.
- Sin was to be avoided in every area of life, and when people did sin atonement and cleansing rites were available, most of which involved the use of sacrificial blood in some way.
- This reached its climax with the annual Day of Atonement ritual, when each part of the tabernacle was smeared with blood to cleanse it from the effect of the nation's sin.
- This would purify and consecrate the sanctuary and the people, allowing God to continue to dwell amongst his people.
- The Israelites were forbidden to consume blood even in the course of eating meat, as it was exclusively to be used for making atonement by sacrifice.
- Animal blood atoned for human sin not because of some magical quality but because God had chosen and prescribed it for this purpose.
- Atonement and forgiveness came through the sacrificial system, but not as a direct physical effect of the rites performed – rather it was God's gracious gift to those who obeyed his word and sought forgiveness through repentance and faith.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEMPLE**

- **The temple as God's earthly 'dwelling place'**

- Despite the great difference in size, the design of the temple reflected to a large extent the pattern provided for the tabernacle.
- The temple was also to represent God's rule over Israel and to be a reminder of his special presence among them.
- The Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle were brought in procession to the temple when it was dedicated (1 Kings 8) - then when the priests withdrew from the holy place, the cloud filled the temple.
- Solomon recognised this as a sign that God would make the temple his special dwelling and reveal his glory there, even though as on Sinai it was shrouded in a dark cloud.
- Solomon's dedication prayer questions whether God can indeed really dwell on earth (1 Kings 8:27).
- Solomon was, however, conscious of praying in God's presence, and requested that prayers directed towards the temple be answered by God from heaven – he focused on the temple's role as place of prayer.
- The temple signified that there was a future for Israel as the people of God, because it expressed the continuation of God's covenant promise to be with them and bless them.

- **Prophetic criticisms of sacrifice and the temple**

- Many passages in the prophetic writings condemn priests and people for their corruption of the sacrificial system.
- Sometimes these focus on idolatry, other times they focus on the hypocrisy of sacrificial ritual without genuine repentance.
- Passages which seem to show a rejection of the 'cult' actually focus on Israel's abuse of the cult.
- It is not correct to say that the prophets condemned sacrifice or envisaged the survival of Israel without it.
- Although the prophets could argue that God's presence on Mount Zion meant that he would defend his people, this protection was not to be seen as unconditional.
- If Israel remained disobedient to the covenant and neglectful of the worship that was honouring to God, terrible judgement would result.
- The temple would have to be destroyed – when this happened in 587BC and many were taken to exile in Babylon, it was seen by the prophets as the inevitable result of continuing rejection.

- **Sacrifice and the temple in the prophetic hope**

- Although the prophets saw God as acting in judgement at the time of the exile, they proclaimed that he would eventually act in forgiveness and allow the people to return home.
- Some indicated that the temple would be restored and become the spiritual centre not just of Israel but also of the nations.
- Ezekiel's prophecy of the restoration actually included a plan for a new temple – the purifying and sanctifying influence of the new temple upon the land would restore it to a paradise situation for God's people.