



The Words of Worship

There is a wealth of nuances in the Hebrew and Greek languages that do not render into our English translations of the Bible, and subsequently are lost to us unless we go back to the original language source. Recently I was convicted to investigate the word “worship”, and with the help of Strong’s Concordance, I discovered there to be no less than five Hebrew words and four Greek words, not including variances, that translate into our one word “worship” in English. Each of the original lexis carries in its full definition a distinction of worship that can be sorted into one of three categories: addressing our **perspective** in worship; our **posture** in worship; and the **product** of our worship.

Worship begins with a right perspective: God is God, I am not. He is terrible in His holiness, and I am in my original state a sinner who cannot stand in His presence and live. In every instance in scripture, when someone gets a glimpse of the glory of God, there is a response of fear and illumination. Consider Isaiah in chapter six of his book: (verse 5) *“Woe to me!...I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!”* Or the response of the apostle John, in Revelation 1:17: *“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said, ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.’”* So this takes us to our first category of “worship words” in Hebrew and Greek: in Hebrew we find the words **yârê’** (*yaw-ray*) and **yir’âh** (*yir-aw*), and in Greek, **phobeō** (*fob-eh’-o*) or **phobos** (*fob’-os*). Strong’s definitions of the above are as follows: “to fear; morally to revere; dreadful exceeding fearfulness; reverence; to be in awe; in terror.” An example of this usage can be found in Jonah 1:9, when Jonah says *“I am a Hebrew and I worship [yârê’] the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”* Other O.T. examples can be found in passages such as 2 Kings 17:34-39 and Isaiah 29:13. The equivalent in the New Testament is seen in verses such as Luke 1:50, which reads in King James and NIV *“His mercy extends to those who fear [phobeō] him,”* but is translated in CEV and The Message as *“He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.”* Other N.T. passages to check out include Luke 12:5 and 23:40; Acts 9:31 and 10:35; 2 Cor. 5:11; Rom. 3:18, and Rev. 14:7.

The consequence of having a right perspective in worship is our second word set: defining the posture of worship. Above we looked at the apostle John in Revelation 1:17 *“I fell at his feet as though dead”*. In Hebrew we now find words such as **sâgad** (*saw-gad*), **s°gid** (*seg-eed*) and **shâchâh** (*shaw-khaw*). Strong’s defines these as follows: *“to prostrate oneself in homage, to fall down [flat], bow down, make to stoop, humbly beseech, make obeisance, crouch.”* When we truly behold our God in awe and reverence, our natural response is to bow down in worship. *“Come, let us bow down in worship [shâchâh], let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.”* (Psalm 95:6). Other examples are too numerous to mention, but check out 2 Kings 17:36, which contains both **yârê’** [**fear**] and **shâchâh** [**worship**]. The Greek equivalent becomes **proskuneō** (*pros-koo-neh’-o*) which extends the definition to include *“to kiss, like a dog licking his master’s hand; to fawn or crouch to; to prostrate oneself in homage; do reverence to, adore.”* Greek examples are extensive, including every verse of John 4:20-24, and throughout Revelation. For our purposes I quote from Luke 4:7,8 where Satan tempts Jesus by saying *“if you worship me, ... [all the kingdoms of the world] will all be yours.”* Jesus’ response is, of course, to quote Deut. 6:13: *“It is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”*

The product of having a right perspective and posture is a commitment response from the heart, found in the Deuteronomy passage just quoted: *“Serve him only.”* We begin by recognizing the holiness and awesomeness of God (in contrast to our sinfulness). We then bow down before Him in recognition that He is Lord, not just of the universe, but of ourselves personally. We then commit our lives in service to him as an act of worship. Note Isaiah’s response of service in the aforementioned passage: *“Here am I. Send me”* (Isaiah 6:8). In Hebrew this is expressed as **p°lach** (*pel-akh*) and **âbad** (*aw-bad*), which means *“to minister, to serve, to work, to become a servant, to be bondmen, in bondage, a worshipper.”* Joshua stated this famously in chapter 24:15: *“...as for me and my household, we will serve [âbad] the Lord.”* Note that in versions such as CEV and The Message, the translations use the word “worship” rather than “serve”. Daniel 7:27 uses the alternate **p°lach**, when he prophesies, *“His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.”* The Greek renders these words to either **latreia** (*lat-ri’-ah*) or **latreuō** (*lat-ryoo’-o*) which is derived from a noun which means *“a hired menial”*. The most famous usage here is probably found in Romans 12:1: *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”* Of course this is also the word rendered **“serve”** as stated by Christ in Luke 4:8 above. But my favourite usage of **latreuō** can be found in Hebrews 12:28,29 (note the connection between **latreuō** and **phobeō** as implied here): *“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”*

In understanding the three-fold dimension of worship as seen in scripture, we gain a more holistic view of it, beyond the act of singing songs or attending “worship” services. Worship begins in our spirit (“perspective”), extends to our physical being (“posture”) and finally expands beyond our personal boundaries to affect the very world we live in (“service”). It transcends time and place and can be applied 24/7, in whatever situation we find ourselves in. Everything we do can indeed become an act of worship to our great and glorious Saviour and God. Hallelujah!

In both Greek & Hebrew, the “worship” word chosen in a passage addresses one of three areas:

Our “perspective”

(yârê & phobeō)

Our “posture”

(sâgad, shâchâh & proskuneō)

Our “product”

(pelach, âbad & latreuō)