

The Way of Worship Through the Scriptures

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“I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12). With these words, spoken to the assembly of the Israelites gathered before him at Mount Sinai, the Lord defines the relationship he desires with those who are to worship him through the ages. The same words, or similar ones, appear throughout the Scripture on the lips of those who speak in God’s name: prophets, psalmists, apostles. In the Bible’s closing pages we hear them again, in John’s vision of the new Jerusalem: “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21:3).

All solid relationships have a structure defining the roles of the partners. Nothing is more frustrating than to be in a relationship in which we cannot depend on the other party, or in which we have trouble understanding what is expected of us. Good relationships also depend on good communication. For this reason, the Lord clearly indicates what his role is, and how we are to respond. He promises to do what a God should do: to give direction and meaning to our lives, to provide for our needs, and to deliver us from our enemies. And we are to do those things that his worshipers should do: to acknowledge him as our supreme authority, and to serve and obey him alone. When the partnership is working properly and there is dependable communication, God releases the benefits he wants to confer on us. And the greatest blessing is his presence with us: “I will walk among you.”

The Scriptural writers use several pictures to describe God’s partnership with us. Sometimes they call it the *covenant*. God’s covenant is like the treaty a great King grants to the subordinate rulers within his empire. For this reason, the Bible often refers to the *kingdom* or rule of God. And sometimes the Scriptures speak of God’s fatherhood, and of his *family* or household. Covenant, kingdom and family are patterns for the way the Lord administers his relationship with us. Maintaining this bond in proper order is what the biblical authors call righteousness, faithfulness and love.

The biblical witness makes it clear that our partnership with God is his idea, not ours. As John puts it, “We love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We know we can depend on God to be faithful to us. But will we do our part to maintain the relationship? It is easy to break God’s covenant. All we need to do is to ignore him, as though we did not need him as our Father and King. To keep the covenant, from the human side, means that we fulfill our part of the agreement.

This is where worship enters the picture. Worship lies at the heart of what we must do to maintain our relationship with the Lord. As Jesus reminds us, the Father seeks genuine worshipers (John 4:23). The biblical verbs most often translated into English as “worship” mean to bow down or humble oneself before a greater authority. In worship, we acknowledge the Lord as our King and offer the tribute of our praise. Through worship, we see God act for us and hear him speak to us, and we tell the story of how he has rescued us from slavery to false and destructive authorities. Worship keeps the lines of communication open. Through worship, we respond to God’s faithfulness by pledging our renewed faithfulness to him, and by “giving him permission” to do his work in our lives. To worship is to tell our loving Father how much we love him in return. And as we do all these things, God blesses us with his presence in our midst.

All parts of the Bible witness to this way of worship. From the story of God’s creation of all things to the final vision of the consummation of his purpose for us, Scripture presents a panorama of the Lord’s call and his people’s response.

The Pentateuch: Foundations of Worship

The first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch (Greek for “five scrolls”), are also known as the Law or Torah. They contain the basic principles of God’s covenant with Israel, as administered through his spokesman Moses. They show how God makes covenants with his people as a way of dealing with a problem: the problem of sin. All that God created was good. But his human creatures, though made in his own image, spoiled that goodness by violating the relationship he wanted to have

with them. They decided they did not need to obey his commandments, thinking they could be like God themselves. In other words, man and woman broke their bond with God through a failure of worship. Their rebellion leads to history's first murder, the death of Abel whose offering to the Lord is the Bible's earliest recorded act of formal worship.

As the Genesis story unfolds, human society further disintegrates to the point that God takes a decisive step: he calls a new people out of their surrounding culture as his special representatives. To Abram he says, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, . . . and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12:2-3). Repeating this promise to the Hebrew patriarchs, the Lord affirms that one day his people will have a land of their own in which to serve him. Faithful to his word, he fulfills his role as protector by delivering them from the oppression of Egypt. Now, perhaps, they will be ready more fully to receive his promise, and be his worshipers: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Through Moses, the Lord establishes at the heart of his covenant law the fundamental obligation of his partners: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). With great care he lays out a way of worship by which his congregation is to keep faith with him, in regulations for priesthood, sanctuary, offering, sacrifice, and holiness of heart and life. Through three annual festivals — Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles — the people are to remember how the Lord has set them free.

But time passes, and a new generation takes the place of those who were present at the holy mountain. How will they, too, enter into the covenant bond with the great King? In his last speech to Israel, with the nation poised to enter the land of Canaan, Moses leads the congregation in a renewal of the covenant. In so doing, he sets forth another principle of biblical worship: it brings into the present those actions through which the Lord has rescued his people and made them his own. Every Israelite is to acknowledge what the Lord has done for him: "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand" (Deut. 6:21). "Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us. . . . The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire" (Deut. 5:3-4). Through worship, we of later generations also take part in those events which have established our identity and defined our faith as the people of God.

The Pentateuch's story reveals how the Lord's presence with his people moves them to worship and to follow him. At particular times and places the fearful majesty of the Lord breaks through to his servants with overwhelming impact. This is the experience of the patriarch Jacob, who at a certain spot has a dream in which the Lord repeats his promise to bless all people through Jacob's descendants. Awakening, Jacob exclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God" (Gen. 28:17). And he vows that the Lord will be his God. Confronted by a holy Power we cannot comprehend, we the creatures must bow and acknowledge our Creator.

Leading the Israelites through the wilderness after saving them from their Egyptian oppressors, the Lord makes his presence visible in smoke and fire, symbols often associated in ancient cultures with the awesome appearance of a deity. As he prepares to speak those solemn words which will define his covenant, the Lord manifests his presence even more strikingly on the mountain in thunder, lightning, thick clouds and a piercing trumpet blast (Exod. 19:14). This is worship language, affirming that God has indeed arrived on the scene to deal with his congregation. Such word pictures appear again and again, climaxing in the Bible's concluding drama of God's judgments.

At those places where God has revealed himself or helped his people in a special way, the early leaders of Israel often erect an altar or set up a memorial stone. Such tangible symbols are reminders of how the Lord has met with us; they have a sacramental quality. But for Israel the unique symbol of the Lord's powerful presence is the ark of the covenant. There God is said to be enthroned above the cherubim, figures signifying a royal authority, and "there I will meet with you" (Exod. 25:22). And the congregation of the Lord perceives his abiding presence in another way: through the word of his commandments, making known the pattern of life in partnership with him. "It is not in heaven . . . But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deut. 30:12, 14). The directives of God's covenant are given their force by the simple statement of his presence: "I

am the Lord.” The way of worship is the interweaving of God’s life with ours. Because we serve the Lord, he is with us; because he is with us, we serve him.

The Historical Books: Setting Worship in Order

From the Law onward, the Hebrew and English Bibles differ in the arrangement of their contents. In the Hebrew Bible, most of the historical books are part of the section called the Prophets, while the books we sometimes call the poetical books are included in a third division called simply the Writings. Our discussion of the way of worship follows the English sequence.

The historical books are what this description implies: a narrative of events in the history of Israel, beginning with the occupation of Canaan, following through the period of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and ending with the account of how worship was reestablished after the people of Judah had returned from exile in Babylon. Through this narrative we learn how God sets worship in order, and how he acts to restore that order when his people turn aside from his ways.

Our story opens with Israel’s entry into Canaan, the land promised to their forefathers. Their leader is Joshua, successor to Moses. The conquest completed, Joshua urges the people to reaffirm their commitment: “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15). The renewal of the Lord’s covenant is a recurring theme in the historical books. Leaders such as Hezekiah and Josiah, kings of Judah, and Ezra the priest after the exile, preside over ceremonies which restore the worship traditions of the congregation of the Lord.

But the great leader of worship is David, the Lord’s chosen king, whose dynasty is to endure through the coming of Messiah. To David the Lord gives the vision for his sanctuary in Jerusalem. After a time of unsettled conditions in the life of the Israelite community, it is David who brings the ark of God to Mount Zion, and there commissions the Levitical priesthood to give thanks to the Lord in music and song. To David’s son Solomon falls the task of erecting the sanctuary, a house called by the name of the Lord, where his worshipers are to offer the tribute of prayer and sacrifice to the great King. The temple is a sacred space where the people of God may sense, in a special way, the glory of his presence. Yet it is only a picture of God’s heavenly dwelling, a focus for the petitions of his people. As Solomon well understands in his prayer dedicating the temple, it is from heaven itself that the Lord answers their prayers, and forgives (1 Kings 8:27-30).

And God’s people do many things for which they must ask his forgiveness. Disorder in life and worship continually threatens the partnership with God. Worship itself, when done with a motive other than to honor and obey the Lord, becomes a barrier to communion with him. As the prophet Samuel had warned earlier, “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). The prophets who follow him, during the period of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, have to contend with the ultimate disobedience against the Lord: the worship of rival gods. Some of these prophets left no writings of their own, and we encounter their story only in the historical books. Men like Elijah and Elisha stand forth as fierce defenders of the covenant, summoning the community to return to the worship of the Lord alone. And when, after another time of disorder, God’s law is rediscovered, it is the prophetess Huldah who repeats God’s judgment: Because Israel has turned away from the Lord, disaster will eventually overtake them.

Yet not even the disaster and disorder of exile can destroy God’s way of worship. Through confession and forgiveness, restoration is possible because God is faithful. Repenting of their sin after hearing Ezra read from the Law, the congregation of Jerusalem is told: “Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting” (Neh. 9:5). In spite of obstacles, the way of worship moves forward.

The Poetical Books: The Worship of Our King

The section of the English Bible known as the poetical books includes the Hebrew wisdom writings — Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes — as well as the Psalms and the Song of Solomon. The way of worship permeates the Psalms, for they originated in the service of the sanctuary. While the way of worship is not the focus of the other books, its foundation, the sovereignty of God, is no less evident.

Job is a worshiper, a patriarch who intercedes for his family. Despite his devotion to God, or because of it, he is severely tested. His is the appeal of an abandoned worshiper: “Let the Almighty

answer me!” (31:35). God’s answer comes in the restoration of that communication which makes worship possible, as Job’s penitent response brings out: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). The Teacher of Ecclesiastes is bothered by the apparent pointlessness of human striving, but concludes that our duty is summed up in the worshiper’s most basic obligation: “Fear God, and keep his commandments” (Eccles. 12:13). In the Proverbs, reverence for the Lord is the motivation for wise and successful living. The correlation the Proverbs make between how we act and what happens to us is a basic principle of the Lord’s covenant — obedience brings blessing, but unfaithfulness results in trouble. The lyric poetry of the Song of Solomon celebrates the love between a king and his bride. The relationship of marriage is a picture of the heavenly King’s greater bond with his cherished people, and a reminder that worship should include telling the Lord how much we love him.

In the Psalms, the sovereignty of the Lord becomes the focus of worship and celebration. In the service of the sanctuary, the Psalms are a sacrifice of praise, an offering of song to accompany the offerings of the altar. The Psalms of petition, many of them associated with the name of David, are often recited by a voice which represents the king of Judah. But this voice speaks for all faithful worshipers to reaffirm the oath of covenant loyalty, “You are my Lord” (Psa. 16:2), and to plead with God for salvation from enemies and other causes of distress. And the Lord answers the worshiper, not because of the worshiper’s merits, but on the basis of the Lord’s own faithfulness to the partnership he has granted, what the Bible calls his *hesed* or “steadfast love.”

In the Psalms of celebration, the community gathers to lift up the Lord as the “great King above all gods” (Psa. 95:3), and to tell the story of his mighty acts of deliverance. These Psalms exalt the sanctuary of Zion, where God meets with his people and answers their prayer. It is the congregation’s hope and expectation “that the King of glory may come in” (Psa. 24:7). As they enthrone him in praise, he makes his presence known in their midst: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). At other times the triumphant cry goes forth: “Make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord! . . . for he comes to judge the earth” (Psa. 96:6, 9). Psalmic worship celebrates the Lord’s presence not only through prayer and song, but also through actions: bowing, lifting the hands, solemn procession, festive dance, pilgrimage to the house of God.

The Psalms clearly reflect the Lord’s administration of his life with us. More thoroughly than any other part of Scripture, they outline the way of worship he has ordained. For this reason, the Psalms have always been used in Christian worship. Through this offering of song, we join with God’s witnesses in every age to bring honor to his name, and to maintain that communication through which he imparts to us his life and blessing.

The Prophetic Books: Worship’s Genuine Motivation

The prophetic books of the English Bible consist of the writings of the later Israelite prophets found in that division of the Hebrew Bible known as the Prophets. They also include a few books (Lamentations and Daniel) which the Hebrew Bible places in its third section, the Writings.

We have already noted that the earlier prophets were advocates for the Lord’s covenant. This is also true of the later prophets, whose words are preserved in books bearing their names. The bond between God and his people is uppermost in their concern, especially when they see that bond violated through our unfaithfulness. The prophet is one to whom the counsels of the Lord have been revealed, and who is therefore compelled by the Spirit of God to declare his word. More often than not, this word is a message of judgment upon a community which has broken its covenant vows, worshiped false gods, and allowed injustice and violence to destroy the *shalom* or well-being that should prevail within the family of God. The prophets understand the heart of God. They feel his anguish, that of a rejected lover: “Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away” (Hos. 6:4).

The setting for prophecy, therefore, is the worship life of God’s congregation, especially the annual festivals when the people gather, giving the prophet his widest audience. Amos goes to Bethel, the royal sanctuary of the northern kingdom of Israel, to mock vain worship at illegitimate sanctuaries. Two centuries later, with the nation of Judah about to fall to foreign invaders, Jeremiah stands in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem to challenge the false hope the people have placed in their religious

institutions. Will you violate the Lord's commandments, he asks, "and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'" (Jer. 7:9-10).

Isaiah, whose book stands at the beginning of the prophetic collection, tells how he was commissioned to speak for the Lord. His account draws its imagery from the worship of God's house: the smoke of incense, the altar fires, the anthems of praise. The hymn he quotes is used in Christian worship to this day: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). Isaiah places great confidence in God's promise to David's royal house; the Lord will defend his holy city for David's sake. Nevertheless, he takes the nation's elite to task for allowing offerings and festivals to mask the ways their oppressive policies have torn the social fabric. Looking ahead to the time of restoration after Judah's captivity, the writings of Isaiah exalt a transcendent God, the Creator who governs all things. God's righteous Servant, whom the church later proclaims as Messiah Jesus, will bear the sins of many. Not Jews alone, but people of all ethnic groups, will be gathered to the Lord: "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa. 56:7).

Israel's public worship is interrupted by the exile in Babylon, yet during this time Daniel shows himself a man of prayer and exceptional faith. The restoration of worship is a concern of the later prophets. Ezekiel, whose prophecy begins with a vision of the awesome majesty of God, understands that the judgment befalling the nation is the result of idolatry, the mixing of alien religions with the worship of the house of God. In a powerful figure of speech, he compares Jerusalem to a wife who has broken faith with her husband. But Ezekiel is also a priest, and offers a detailed blueprint for the restored sanctuary out of which will flow a river of life and healing. Haggai is disturbed because the people have provided fine homes for themselves, while neglecting the house of the Lord. For Malachi, the messenger of the Lord's covenant is soon to appear, to purify the insincere offerings of his priests.

The prophets remind us that our way of worship should never be a matter of custom and ritual alone, but should reflect a genuine and all-embracing commitment to the Lord. Despite the fact that we, his creatures, are prone to compromise that commitment, the Lord speaks and acts to fulfill his promise, "You will be my people, and I will be your God." As Jeremiah puts it, in place of the partnership broken by sin, God will make a new covenant with us, inscribing his law upon our inward motivation (Jer. 31:31-33). In their vision for this renewed relationship with God and the worship that expresses it, the prophets of Israel direct us toward what God has done through his Son Jesus Christ.

The Gospels and Acts: Focusing Worship on Jesus

In Abram, God called a people as his servants, initiating a plan to bring a disobedient world back to him. In the covenant of Mount Sinai and in the choice of King David, the Lord moved his plan forward with directives for his way of worship. As the Bible's story phases from Old Testament to New, we see how God takes a final and radical step to restore the broken relationship with his human family.

The renewed covenant comes to focus in one Man, Jesus of Nazareth. As God's obedient Son and Servant, Jesus fulfills both sides of the partnership. He is the living expression of God's being and purpose: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The sovereignty of God is made visible in the ministry of Jesus — his preaching of God's rule, his authority over sickness and demonic powers, his exposure of inadequate understandings of God's way. Yet Jesus fulfills the human side of the covenant as well, bearing on his cross the judgment against our unfaithfulness, serving in our place "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). By raising Jesus from the dead, God vindicates his faithful Servant and verifies his Messiahship. In the words of Peter, preaching in Jerusalem after the resurrection, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Exalted to the place of authority at God's right hand, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, the infant church, giving them power to proclaim the good news of what God has done to set his people free. Jesus has triumphed over death, opening up for us new life in communion with God. In Jesus' own words, "Because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19).

This is the witness of the four Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — and of the Acts of the Apostles, sequel to Luke. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has made whole that which our disobedience had torn apart. True worship is possible because we have seen the Father's glory in the Son, and because he has established "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).

Therefore the Gospel story begins with acts of worship. The mother of Jesus exults in her Savior's mercy. Humble shepherds and wise Magi bow before the newborn King. A heavenly choir chants the glory of the Most High. Aged saints praise God and give thanks. The needy bow down before Jesus, recognizing their Healer. Disciples make the worshiper's confession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

The ordinances of Christian worship have their origin in the story told by the Gospels and the Acts. We are baptized into God's kingdom following the example and commission of Jesus himself. At the Lord's table, we give thanks over the loaf and cup because Jesus said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). As Jesus taught his disciples, we pray together, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Recognizing the call of the Holy Spirit upon those who take up the work of ministry, we lay hands upon them as did the apostles. The pattern for the church's way of worship is summarized in Luke's account of its earliest days: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Because Jesus rose on the first day of the week, his people gather on the Lord's Day to worship in his presence. Phrases from the Gospels echo through historic Christian worship: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth." "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us." "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The cycle of Christian worship proclaims the story of our deliverance. The cycle may be as simple as the annual celebration of Jesus' birth and resurrection. Traditionally it includes other key events: Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the events of his passion or suffering leading to his crucifixion and burial, his ascension into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples at Pentecost. The Gospels themselves are part of Christian worship; in some churches they are read each week from the midst of the congregation, a vivid reminder that the Lord Jesus lives with his people. When we gather to hear the story of how God has come to us in Christ, and to receive the symbols of his body and blood, we also live the story. Historic Christian worship combines the proclamation of God's Word with the service of the Lord's Table, making the Gospel real through sight, sound, taste and touch.

The Letters of Paul: Worship as Life in Christ

Once a zealous Hebrew and ardent persecutor of the church, Paul was transformed through a revelation of the risen Christ, and commissioned to carry his message into the Gentile world. He sees himself as the steward of a great "mystery," a truth only now revealed in its full implications — not only Jews, but Gentiles as well, have a place in God's covenant people. Establishing churches in Asia Minor and Greece, Paul writes to them and to other congregations to clarify this truth and to address other issues.

For Paul, as for other biblical witnesses, the broken relationship with our Creator has become evident through a failure of worship. The universe God has made should be enough to convince us that we must take him seriously. Yet people still refuse to worship. "Although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Rom. 1:21). The attempt to prove our own goodness and competence by some cultural standard, in effect leaving God out of the picture, is an exercise in futility; we become enslaved to what Paul calls "the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). There is only one solution: abandon this effort, offer ourselves to God, and let him work his will in us. This requires a renewing of our mind, a change in perspective made possible only when we die as the people we have been, and rise with Christ into new life energized by his Spirit. For Paul, this sacrifice of ourselves to God in Christ is our "spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

Being united with Christ means, for Paul, to become part of a new creation, one which displaces the creation disfigured by humanity's rebellion against God. We live out this new-creation life through a new community, the church. Not only the creation, but other themes from God's way of worship receive new meaning in terms of life in this community. The inheritance of God's people is not a tract of land but the life-giving Spirit of Christ. Jesus is the Passover lamb, and the Passover festival is the Christian life of sincerity and integrity (1 Cor. 5:7-8). The house of God has become the body of

Christian believers, the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19). The church itself is “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

Paul also explores the deeper implications of the ceremonies Jesus commanded. Beyond repentance of sin, baptism is dying and rising with Christ. It is an essential step in becoming part of God’s family: there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Eph. 4:5-6). The Lord’s Supper, a proclamation of Jesus’ death, is also a communion in his life as represented though his body, the church. “The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body” (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Since he wrote before the Gospels were compiled, Paul’s account of the Lord’s Supper is the oldest we possess. But the developing church had other worship practices, and some of Paul’s letters deal with them. Singing “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” and giving thanks to God are part of what it means to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18-20). Paul also advises his congregation about how to worship with the spiritual gifts of tongues, interpretation and prophecy. Prophecy is especially valuable as a witness to people who do not understand the power of God. It reveals God’s presence with his people, even to the unbelieving visitor: “falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Cor. 14:25).

Perhaps borrowing an early Christian hymn, Paul pictures the triumph and authority of Christ in terms of covenant worship, the offering of homage and the declaration of loyalty to the great King. Because of Jesus’ obedience, says Paul, God has exalted him to the highest place. Therefore, at his name every knee shall bow, “and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11). Although Paul translates many aspects of God’s way of worship into a new frame of reference, he is still very much a Jewish thinker, and the covenant between God and his people remains the foundation of his teaching.

Other Letters and the Revelation: The Consummation of Worship

The books that come at the end of the New Testament are a collection of letters from leaders of the early church. Even the Revelation to John, which calls itself a prophecy, begins with letters to seven churches. When compared with Paul’s letters, this literature in general finds the church at a later stage of development. The writers grapple especially with issues threatening the church’s life: distorted teachings arising within the community, and persecution from external authorities hostile to the new faith. Although the exact time frame for some of this literature continues to be debated in Christian scholarship, we need to remind ourselves what was happening in the surrounding culture. The Jewish community in which the church found itself was experiencing great internal disorder. This upheaval would lead to a revolt against the Roman powers, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. Against this troubled background the later New Testament writers seek to maintain the church on a steady course and to prepare it for difficult times to come.

It is no wonder, then, that we find these writers anchoring themselves in the solid realities of the Gospel. Jude, for example, urges his readers “to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). This faith is centered in the glory of Christ. Peter recalls the glory he beheld in Jesus’ transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16-18), while John appeals to what he has personally witnessed in the appearance of Jesus, the “Word of life” (1 John 1:1-2). Such testimony naturally has implications for worship. Peter reminds the church of its calling to be “a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” declaring the praise of a merciful God (1 Pet. 2:9-10). John focuses on loving God in response to his love for us; such love takes the form of commitment to our fellow believers, and acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God. James, the brother of Jesus, writes in a practical vein about Christian living; he encourages prayer, singing God’s praise, and being anointed with oil for healing.

The author of Hebrews establishes our way of worship firmly in the covenant. Jesus the Son is “the radiance of God’s glory,” and all things are subject to him. The religious institutions of the old covenant — sanctuary, priesthood and sacrifice — are pictures pointing to his greater ministry. As our High Priest, Jesus has offered himself as the sacrifice which atones for sin and restores our communion with God. Therefore he is the mediator of a superior covenant, always interceding with God for us. Our response is to keep faith with God through a disciplined and obedient life, which includes gathering regularly with other worshipers and continually offering “a sacrifice of praise to

God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15). Through Christ, the author declares, we have come not to Mount Sinai but “to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22). God now speaks and acts in even more majestic ways to place us in his kingdom. Therefore, we are to worship him with reverence and awe. The author of Hebrews offers us a glimpse of the consummation of worship in God’s presence, a vision taken to even greater intensity in the book which closes the Holy Scriptures.

The Revelation to John is a dramatic unfolding of the judgments to fall upon those who oppose the authority of the king of Kings and persecute his witnesses. Yet, at another level, it is also a supreme worship-drama. The rebellion and eventual defeat of the enemies of God proceed in parallel with a series of solemn acts of worship in the presence of the Ancient of Days. These ceremonies draw much of their imagery and language from the Hebrew prophets. But they center on Jesus, “the Lamb who was slain” (Rev. 5:12), who is worthy to receive praise and honor together with God upon his throne. This worship, instigated by four “living creatures” who surround the throne, is taken up by twenty-four elders, representing the leadership of the covenant community through all ages. It expands to include God’s entire “kingdom of priests,” a multitude “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9-10), then the host of heaven, then “every creature.” Contrasted with this worship of the Almighty is the false worship of demonic and earthly powers, the “dragon” and the “beast,” who claim an authority that belongs to God alone. This idolatrous worship is judged in the destruction of the unfaithful city, pictured as a prostitute, which had persecuted the prophets and saints of God.

John’s final vision brings worship to its consummation in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1), a biblical expression for the administration of the covenant. God’s creation, marred by the rebellion of those he made in his own likeness, has come full circle to renewal and restoration in the worshiping community, called “the Holy City, new Jerusalem” and pictured as the faithful wife of the Lamb. The presence of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb now dwells in the midst of his people, as a voice proclaims, “He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (21:3). Into this restored relationship of worship and communion with God the Spirit-filled church now invites all who desire life: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come’” (22:17).

Does the worship described in the Bible’s final pages reflect the developing practices of the early church? Or is it a vision Jesus has given his people to guide us as we pursue the way of worship the Lord has outlined in his Word? Perhaps both. Certainly the ceremonies described in the Revelation have influenced the shape and content of historic Christian worship. They remind God’s faithful ones to focus not on themselves and their own needs but on the living presence and surpassing majesty of the king of Kings and lord of Lords. As the climax to the scriptural account of God’s way of worship, the Revelation underscores the fact that the Bible, from beginning to end, is indeed a book of worship.

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