

Before Jehovah's Awful Throne - and other worship aberrations

By William Richardson

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Adventism, I became familiar with quite a few hymns in the official church hymnal. Although I didn't learn the page numbers of any of them except one—the first one in the hymnal. It was entitled, “Before Jehovah's Awful Throne.”

Now with kids, most words have only one primary meaning. “Bill you treated your brother just awful this morning.” “That woman who sang for church this morning—wasn't she awful?” So, “Before Jehovah's Awful Throne,” sort of intrigued me. Just what was an awful throne. If it was anything like my behavior, it was certainly bad—that was clear.

Still the first verse of that old hymn sent a very mixed signal. It stated that before that awful throne, the nations were to “bow with sacred joy.” But the last phrase was threatening - “Know that the Lord is God alone; He can create, and He destroy.” That sentiment is strikingly similar to the Bill Cosby line to his exasperating son. Cosby threatens, “I brought you into this world—I'll take you out.”

But when God says it—its not all that funny. In fact, to young minds, the words “awful” and “destroy,” even when sung to a fairly nice melody, make for some pretty scary impressions. And it was never sung around the camp fire at Junior Camp. It clearly didn't fit in with the Cum BaYa genre. To my knowledge it was only and ever sung at the 11:00 o'clock hour on Sabbath morning. It was only at the worship hour—so I gathered that there was to be something just a little scary involved in worship.

CAMP MEETING EASED SOME OF THE ANXIETY

But then came camp meeting and some of the anxiety drained away because of the meeting in the big tent. The evening meetings were held in this enormous tent. But before they pitched it, they hauled in several truck loads of wonderful sawdust. I can almost smell that sawdust still—and I loved it. And although my parents were very conservative, faithful church goers who never tolerated Cherrios or coloring books in church, they did allow my brother and I, when we were quite young, to take a small car or truck to the evening meetings, and after the meeting had droned on for a while, we were allowed to sit in the sawdust and make little roads for our trucks. So somewhere along the way I concluded that if God didn't object too strenuously to my playing in the sawdust during the preaching, maybe He wasn't totally scary or too awful all the time.

THE NARROWNESS OF OUR VIEWS

But still the actual meaning and shape of worship remained an enigma. Just a short distance down the street from my boyhood home was the campground of another denomination. Like us, they only had meetings there for a short time in the summer and their sign at the main gate didn't make clear what denomination they were. Some of my Adventist friends called them Free

Methodists, but the more irreverent term was the Holy Rollers. I'm still not sure which church they were, but in retrospect, I suspect they were one of the more charismatic churches. From our front porch we could easily hear their praises and their singing. Though neither I nor any of my friends ever saw any evidence of it, the name Holy Rollers came from the apocryphal accounts of their purported rolling down the aisles in some kind of religious frenzy. And so, on a warm summer evening, on those rare occasions when we would get up the nerve stroll by their camp ground, I am embarrassed to confess that it was strictly out of curiosity at best and scoffing at worst that drew us. One thing was very clear to us young Adventists—that noisy worship style was not just different, it was wrong. But that exclusivist attitude about worship practices really has scant support in Scripture.

In fact, it has often seemed to me that the rigidity of our positions is in direct proportion to the fuzziness of the biblical rules or absolutes. Pick a topic that gets people exercised very quickly and in most cases, (jewelry, diet, inter-racial marriage, etc.), I will venture to say that the biblical absolutes will most likely be somewhat ambiguous. We surely don't get all that excited about topics where Scripture is clear. If you want a lively discussion, you don't push your people into a discussion of the pre-millennial second coming of Christ or even Righteousness by Faith or the proper mode of baptism. The evidence for those is very clear, so discussion is pointless. But if the Bible is just a bit unclear, the temperature and the decibel level nearly always rises. There is an old bromide, "I don't know whether eating meat causes high blood pressure, but the discussion of it does." In a somewhat strained analogy, I will offer this rough equivalent about worship - "If you raise your hands in school you'll get the teacher's attention. If you raise your hands during Adventist public prayers, you'll get the church Board's attention." There are certain rather definite limitations within which our worship practices must fall even if you can't find those limitations in Scripture. And we can get pretty exercised if we find ourselves in a worship setting that seems to fall outside those limits. And at times, it almost seems like it doesn't matter what the Bible says, because we know what's right. Or should we say, we know what we like.

THE CONFUSING BIBLICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF WORSHIP

But the Bible isn't very big on specific rules and acceptable practices in worship. And if some of the hints it does spell out are contrary to our personal practices, we simply turn away from the voice of instruction and go our own way. For example, Adventists, as I have indicated, generally, are not really into much hand-waving during prayer or singing. So if there are texts that seem to suggest that the practice isn't inherently evil, I think we pause only briefly before making some statement about those passages are not referring to the kind of worship service we sit in. Hebrews 12:12 "Lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees. . . ." And even more specifically, Ps 134:2 "Lift up your hands to the Holy Place and bless the Lord. . ." And again, "I will lift up my hands and call on thy name." (Ps. 63:4).

Of course two of those references are from the pen of David and what would we expect of a guy who danced before the Lord "with all his might." (2 Sam 6:14). But the point is, throughout Scripture, proper worship behavior and practice defies fixed patterns. I think we as a people group try pretty hard to be "people of the Book," but in regard to worship practices, that effort can be challenging indeed—because the Book just doesn't give us much to work with—that is, if

we are looking for specific instruction on how to sing, how to dress, whether to stand, or kneel or prostrate ourselves, etc. In worship practices, biblical specifics for the 21st Century are anything but that. Take a look at some of the worship events and venues spelled out in our operator's manual.

Adam and Eve and family (according to PP, p. 62), went back to the gate of the Garden of Eden and there worshiped God .

Abraham was, for years the equivalent of a Bedouin, moving his tents with his flocks—essentially doing a lot of camping. But again EGW says that “wherever he pitched his tent, close beside it was set up his altar” on which he offered sacrifices. So his worship involved lots of small piles of rocks and lots of bloody animal carcasses.

Later, a more permanent, though portable tent was constructed for Israel, and, in addition to lots of bloody animal carcasses, there were rituals involving incense, burning oil lamps, little piles of flat bread. And for over a thousand years the tabernacle and later the temple was the focal point of worship practices that involved incredible amounts of symbolism.

In New Testament times, the persecution and scattering of the Jews caused them to develop synagogues, which were like little temples, only devoid of many of the symbols that had characterized the temple practices.

But the death and resurrection of Jesus resulted in still more changed. In time a rancorous, even fatal split developed between His followers and the faithful synagogue worshipers. Finally, the Christians (as they came to be called in Antioch), were kicked out of the synagogues and had to invent their own worship practices. They met in homes, they met out in the open, they met in upper rooms—wherever they could find places to get together. But as the house churches gradually became more formalized, since the earliest Christian leaders had all come out of Judaism and the synagogues, it should not be too surprising that many of the synagogue practices carried over directly into Christianity. The Scripture reading, the lesson or homily, the responsive readings, even the songs (which are really adaptations of the Psalms), were in varying ways all part of the synagogue services. But with the scattering of Christians around all parts of the then-known world, a great deal of latitude in worship practices remained.

However, in Corinth things became a little too free-spirited and the normally open-minded Paul drew a line of limits. Listen to his concern in 1 Cor 14:26 - “What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” Clearly there was a lot of audience participation, but apparently not a lot of edification. In fact, things were so frenetic that in vs. 23, Paul's impatience bubbles to the surface when he asserts, “If outsiders or unbelievers enter will they not say you are mad?!” And then at the end of this thought section in this chapter he concludes, “All things should be done decently and in order.” (1 Cor 14:40).

So, clearly the paucity of details about worship practices does not leave the sky as our only limit of how we are to worship. But as is so often the case in Scripture, broad principles, important principles, eternal principles are laid out again and again, and the Lord expects us to use our

brains and the impressions and directions of His Spirit to sort out reasonable applications of those principles. It is a process that requires diligence and discipline, but He has given us the necessary equipment to do it. And that means we're obliged to do it.

From Paul's counsel to the Corinthians, it is clear that worship behavior is not a wide-open decision. The rule of the time of the Judges just does not apply here—though there are those who seem to suggest that it should - “Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” That is precisely what they were doing in Corinth and Paul put a serious damper on their worship behavior. Looking at all the various worship experiences described in Scripture, one constant principle emerges—at the very heart of a genuine worship experience there is always, without exception, an encounter between a person and God. And I think we can go on to say that whatever enhances that encounter enhances worship and what detracts from that encounter detracts from meaningful worship.

So as we plan our worship experiences, it is very important that we keep before us this central question—what is it that will most likely enhance our encounter with the Almighty? If worship is to happen, He must confront us, but we are asked to set the stage for that confrontation. Admittedly, that still leaves a great deal of latitude. There are those who feel that the stage for worship must be set in complete silence—as silence makes more audible the voice of God. That is one side of the spectrum of worship. On another side, there are those who feel that worship is deeply emotional and needs to include outpourings of that emotion in various kinds of vocal expressions and bodily movements. You see, the tower of Babel complicated many aspects of our lives—worship being one of them. From that strange tower experience we ran away from each other and splayed out in a thousand directions and into thousands of cultures—cultures who live and dress and eat and marry and worship in ways very different and often very opposed to the style of others. So it should come as no surprise that worship encounters can be very difficult to systematize, and categorize and canonize. Yet Christian groups keep trying to do just that.

In fact, we all tend to think of worship within fairly narrow limits—limits that our own past and our own culture has imposed on us. What we at first became accustomed to often dictates what satisfies us throughout our lives. If, as a child I first attended a small country church in which members often dialogued from their seats with the Sabbath School Superintendent, I may always feel slightly “chilled” by the atmosphere in the 2,000 member institutional church with the pipe organ. In fact it may always sound slightly contrived to me when they speak of the foyer as the narthex and the platform as the chancel and the main sanctuary as the nave. On the other hand, if my early recollection of worship consistently included padded pews, a robed choir, and total silence between numbers, I may always feel that the little country church or the noisy Pentecostals practice a caricature of worship, not the real thing. But we must guard against a very narrow personal prescription of what type of worship behavior is the real thing. Unity in devotion to our Lord need not include total uniformity of worship behavior. Every church Paul founded had its idiosyncrasies, yet he had a word of praise or thanksgiving for every one of them—(although the Galatians didn't get much praise). We may all sit at one huge banquet table in the kingdom, but until then, we should allow one another to sit at different tables and maybe even in differently shaped rooms.

This month's *Christianity Today* (April, 2005), includes a short side-bar article entitled, "Big Dream in Little Rock." It tells of a very large church, the membership of which represents 21 nations. The congregation includes a U.S. Senator, a homeless man, a former NBA star, an undocumented alien, a local TV anchorwoman, a Middle Eastern convert from Islam, an attorney, a disabled teenager, a physician, an alcoholic, and a blind man. The church is called the Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas. Early on, the Pastor, Mark DeYmaz recognized that "one size fits all" doesn't work in worship. So there is no dominant style. Seven different worship teams take turns leading Sunday services.

"If the worship style is the same from week to week, it will appeal only to a certain segment of the population, which puts up an unintended barrier," DeYmaz says.

But it is important to remember that what we do is set the stage. Just how the Divine-human encounter plays out may vary considerably, while still being genuine worship. The author of Hebrews makes a strong suggestion about one important aspect of our setting that stage. He urged that it be corporate—you need to come together. Hebrews 13:24,25 - "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

I believe we need a quiet, reflective one-on-one meditative time with God. We need the quiet stillness in order to allow the distractions to fade and the voice of God to become truly audible. But we clearly need each other and the collective encouragement and depth that corporate worship offers. Directions for a fixed style or pace or volume, whether quiet and contemplative, whether organ or guitar, whether sedate or lively, those directions simply cannot be found with any specificity in the written Word. At the same time, as we have seen in 1 Cor 14, there can be practices that do not enhance a worship encounter, that will not edify the group and in fact will be a turn-off to outside observers. So we must always approach the subject with an attitude of reverent caution. What Scripture is clear about, and what is consistent, is that worship is a Divine-human encounter and whenever that happens, the humans either fall silent or express a deep sense of awe (Isaiah thought he would surely die when God confronted him in the temple), and smallness in the presence of the Almighty. I have to believe that David's ecstatic dancing before the Lord was an aberration that would not be very well understood in our culture and would most likely mystify and offend more than it would edify and attract. As I have already observed, our setting and our culture cannot be dismissed as unimportant.

Now while we are expected to set the stage for worship, to physically come together and surround ourselves with some kind of worship environment, on occasion God may take that stage-setting into his own hands. Sometimes it takes quite a nudge from God before we catch the proper perspective and posture for a worship experience. So on occasion, He may step in and get our attention for a worship experience that we need, but could not anticipate or plan on our own. Some of what I will call great worship moments in Scripture were totally set up and completely orchestrated by God. Note a couple of well-known examples.

In Genesis 22, God toys with Abraham for some days about his boy, Isaac and ultimately convinces him that he is to march him far away to a certain mountain top and there offer him up as a bloody sacrifice. Abraham does not at all understand, but complies. Finally, after some days of travel, a tear-stained explanation and embrace, Abraham prepares to cut the throat of his son.

Then, in a last second surprise that would have done Hollywood proud, God steps into the picture and saves Isaac. In Gen 22:12,13, God calls to Abraham, “Don’t harm your son - (vs. 13). And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, behind him a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns.” So he offered it as a burnt offering, So Abraham called the name of the place, “Jehovah Jireh,” the Lord will provide.” What a worship moment that turned out to be. Plus it was not only symbolic of a great substitution to come, but prophetic. Years later, as Israel laid out the plans for the great Temple, that suggestion that “the Lord will provide,” was the sentiment that fit the location of the great temple. There on that very same hill, Mount Moriah, the temple was built and for years, that lesson that “the Lord will provide” was graphically illustrated by their symbols, several times a day. For Abraham, God set the stage for a worship moment with ramifications far beyond anything Abraham could have imagined.

But I also like the worship experience of Jacob recorded in Gen 28:13 ff. Jacob is in the midst of his headlong flight from home, from his murderous brother. As darkness falls, he finds a secluded spot and settles down with a rock for a pillow. In the night “he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him” (Gen 28:12,13). And the Lord promised to be with him and keep him and stay with him until He would bring him back to this land..

Jacob is overwhelmed and in a flushed, almost breathless response cries out, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen 28:17). Surely, finding yourself at the gate of heaven is tantamount to a worship experience and for Jacob, that worship experience took place in an out-of-the-way corner of a rocky field in mid-Palestine. Apparently the gate of heaven is not limited to some distant spot in space like the Constellation Orion, nor is it limited to a soaring nave with a carpeted chancel and a robed choir accompanied by a pipe organ. The gate of heaven may be our back porch or a quiet meadow or some other out-of-the-way place that we least expect.

But remember, it is not either/or. It is not the meadow or the church—it is the meadow and the church; the private and the public, the quiet and the corporate. But given the variety of settings and occasions, whether corporate and organized or personal and private, it is clear that you can come as you are on the outside, but on the inside, a sense of humility and awe is absolutely required—not entirely unlike the feeling of coming before Jehovah’s awful throne and bowing with sacred joy, for He alone is God. He can create and He will destroy.