

# **Heavenly Worship: The Biblical Vision**

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**Andrews University Music and Worship Conference**

**March 4, 2006**

## **Introduction**

For many years I have been interested in exploring the biblical vision of worship. A few years ago Dr. Lilianne Doukhan asked me to write a chapter on worship in the Old Testament for a book on worship she was editing. As I began to study more deeply the subject of worship in the Old Testament, I discovered various modern approaches toward understanding biblical worship.

### **Historical Sweep of Worship in Bible Times (Encyclopedias and Dictionaries)**

Most biblical encyclopedias and Bible dictionaries provide an historical, chronological sweep throughout Old Testament and New Testament salvation history.<sup>1</sup> From this approach an outline

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<sup>1</sup>See e.g., G. Henton Davies, "Worship in the OT," *IDB* 4:879-883; Cf. Yoshiaki Hattori, "Theology of Worship in the Old Testament," in *Worship: Adoration and Action*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 21-50, and Andrew Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* (Nashville: Star Song, 1993), chapter 3: "From Abraham to Ezra: The Historical Development of Hebrew Worship" (pp. 30-46). For articles covering both Old and New Testament times from a historical survey perspective, see, e.g., G. W. Bromiley, "Worship," *ZPED* 4:975-9 *ZPED* 4:975-990; Andrew E. Hill, "Worship," *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 838-845; and R. P. Martin, "Worship," *ISBE*

of the history of worship emerges for the Old Testament:

1. **Heavenly Sanctuary** before sin arises: Isa 14; Eze 28
  - ↔ The “Covering Cherub”
  - ↔ The “Mount of the Congregation”
  - ↔ Great Controversy arises over the issue of worship<sup>2</sup>
2. **Eden** (before sin)
  - ↔ Garden Sanctuary:<sup>3</sup> three spheres of holiness—whole earth, garden, tree of life; eastern orientation; “dress and keep” = cultic language for the work of the priests.
  - ↔ Adam and Eve come to worship in cool of day, as priests in the Sanctuary.
  - ↔ Eden worship is a copy of the heavenly “Eden” worship before sin—cf. Ezek 28:12-15; Isa 14:12.
3. **Outside the Garden** (Genesis 3 and 4)
  - ↔ Eastern gate, cherubim—shekinah glory.
  - ↔ Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel come to worship and sacrifice.
  - ↔ Cain and Abel represent the two ways in worship: trust in one’s own efforts, or trust in the blood of the Lamb and faithful obedience to God’s word.<sup>4</sup>
4. **Patriarchs:**
  - ↔ Abraham (and other patriarchs) builds an altar wherever he goes (Gen 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7)
    - ↔ Basic elements of worship after Abraham defeats the four kings (Genesis 14:17-24): worship leader, Melchizedek; bread and wine, blessing of God Most High for deliverance; giving of tithe.
    - ↔ Abraham goes to Mt. Moriah to worship (Genesis 22).
5. **Mosaic sanctuary**
  - ↔ Pentateuch devotes 50 chapters to describing the sanctuary and liturgy

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(revised ed.,) 4:1117-1133. For worship in the New Testament times, see, e.g., D. E. Aune, “Early Christian Worship,” *ABD* 6:973-989.

<sup>2</sup>See Richard M. Davidson, “Cosmic Metanarrative for the Coming Millennium,” *JATS* 11 (2000): 1-6-108.

<sup>3</sup>See *ibid*, 108-111, for seventeen lines of biblical evidence that the Garden of Eden is to be considered as the first earthly sanctuary, modeled after the heavenly sanctuary.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, 111-112; cf. Joachim Azevedo, “At the Door of Paradise: A Contextual Interpretation of Gen 4:7,” *Biblische Notizen* 100 (1999): 48-59.

- ↔ Worship during the 40 years in wilderness.
- ↔ Worship at Shiloh for nearly 400 years.
- 6. **David and Solomon:**
  - ↔ Building of the Temple (1 Ki 5-6; 2 Chron 2-5)
  - ↔ Composing the music, appointing the singers and worship officiants (1 Chron 22-26)
    - ↔ The whole book of Psalms comprises the “hymn book” for the Temple worship
    - ↔ The Psalms describe the experience of worship and worshipers at the temple.
- 7. **Divided Monarchy:**
  - ↔ False worship of the fertility cults (Baal and Asherah)
  - ↔ Reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Ki 18, 22-23; 2 Chron 29-31,34-35)
  - ↔ Destruction of the Temple and worship in Exile.
- 8. **Post-Exilic Times:**
  - ↔ Restoration of temple and worship (Ezra-Nehemiah)
    - ↔ Rise of synagogue worship: *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9);
    - Amidah* (18 blessings), *Torah* reading, Psalms.

And one could extend this same historical survey approach in looking at the New Testament times.

### **Word Study (Bible Word-Books)**

Another approach toward understanding biblical worship is to examine the different Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek terms used in the Scriptures to denote worship. This is the approach taken in Theological Word Books.<sup>5</sup> Over a dozen different Hebrew/Aramaic terms have been translated as “worship” in one or more modern English versions, and several other words not translated as “worship” denote the worship experience or attitude in the Old Testament. In Hebrew almost every word has a “word picture” behind it (in its etymology), and this etymology often is helpful in visualizing the root meaning of the word.<sup>6</sup> Here is an outline

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<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., *NIDOTTE*, *TDOT*, *TWOT*. Cf. Hill, chapter 1, “Increase Your Word Power: An Old Testament Worship Vocabulary” (pp. 1-10).

<sup>6</sup>Though one must beware of the “root fallacy” where the root meaning or etymology is

of the results of this approach:

1. “Worship”: *hishtaḥawah* (*hishtafel* of *ḥawah*)—some 170 times— literally means “bow down, prostrate oneself, bend low, make obeisance” [cf. LXX *proskynéÇ*, “prostrate oneself in reverence”; *gonypetéÇ /gÇny*, “fall on one’s knees in humility and submission”]. This is the word used most frequently in Hebrew to denote worship (e.g., Gen 22:5; Exod 24:1; Ps 29:2). Word picture: “to fall on one’s face in reverence.” Bowing low before royalty or one in a position of honor or authority was a common gesture in the ancient near East. As we will amplify later in this presentation, this word leads us into the inner essence of true worship. Worship is bending low before our Maker, recognizing and acknowledging His holiness and our creatureliness. It is submitting to His sovereignty, responding to His majestic presence.
2. “Worship” *segad* (Aramaic: 12 times in Daniel 2 and 3; four times as an Aaramaic loanword in Isa 44 and 46.) Word picture: “do homage by prostration.” This has the same basic meaning as its Hebrew counterpart above.
3. “Serve”: *ʿabad* (translated “worshippers” in 2 Kings 10:19-23 KJV, NKJV); [cf. LXX *latreúÇ / latreia*, “serve, service”]. Word picture: “work as a (menial) servant, perform acts of worship, as a whole way of life.” This word is used over 25 times in parallel with the word *hishtaḥawah* “bow down to worship” (e.g., Exod 4:31; Ps 95:6). While *hishtaḥawah* denotes the narrow meaning, the actual gesture of worship, ‘*abad* “serve” often indicates the wider meaning of worship, the whole way of life as worship of God (see, e.g., Josh 24:15; Ps 2:11).
4. “Attend to, minister”: *sharat*. Word picture: “ministerial service, as opposed to menial service.” Translated as “worship” in Eze 20:32 (RSV), this term is usually reserved for the lifelong calling of the priests and Levites (Deut 10:8 18:5-7; Eze 44:11), the officially appointed and commissioned worship leaders in Israel. In the ultimate plan of God this ministerial calling was to be extended to all Israel, including faithful Gentiles (Isa 56:6; 61:6).
5. “Seek” or “Inquire”: *darash*. Word picture: “treading” a place, or “beating a path” to something or someone. Sometimes translated in English as “worship” (see Ezra 4:2; 6:21 RSV), this term describes the spiritual inquiry on the part of the worshiper; worship is a sincere quest for God in gratitude for Who He is (Pss 27:4, 8-9; 63:1-4).
6. “Fear” or “revere”: *yará* . Word picture: standing in fear or awe of someone or something. This Hebrew word describes the righteous “fear” or “awe” dimension

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automatically read into every occurrence of the word. Etymology or root meaning often give the “original flavor” of the word, even if later usage does not always consciously link with, or does not in fact still imply that original meaning.

of worship (e.g., Exod 14:31; Deut 31:12-13). Worship is reverent obedience and devotion to God as Creator, Covenant Maker, and Redeemer (Lev 19:32; Ps 27:1; Hab 3:2). In the OT God asks His people to “fear” Him and worship Him (Eccl 12:12).

7. “Pay reverence to, serve”: *pelah*. This Aramaic verb (e.g., Dan 3:28 and nine other times in the Aramaic portions of the Old Testament) and its related noun *polhan* “worship” (only in Ezra 7:19), combines the idea of the Hebrew *yar* “fear, reverence,” and also the Hebrew *abad* “serve” (see above). Word pictures: “to split or cultivate the ground [Hebrew meaning]—labor/serve;” and “to fear, respect, venerate [Akkadian meaning].”
8. “Sacrifice”: *zabah* [sacrifice]. Word picture: “to slaughter an animal for sacrifice.” This term is sometimes used in parallel with *hishtawah* “worship” to denote the sacrificial aspect of worship (e.g., 1 Sam 1:3; 2 Ki 17:36). The sacrifice of the animal was the foundation of worship in the Old Testament (after the entrance of sin), and the bowing down was the human response to the central sacrificial act. This points out vividly that the sacrifice of the Son of God is at the heart of worship, and based upon the shedding of His blood we may bow in grateful worship.

The next five words describe various elements of praise as part of the worship experience:

9. “Praise”: *halal* [praise]. This term appears almost sixty times as a verb and thirty times as a noun in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps 22:3; 150:6). Word picture: “be bright, shine, shout.” Here is a picture of praise in worship comprised of bright, shining joy in the Lord that flashes forth from our countenances and makes us want to shout out His praises! This is the verb behind the Hebrew loanword “Hallelujah” (Praise the Lord).
10. “Praise, thank, confess”: *yadah*. This term appears some 53 times in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 7:17; 145:10). Word picture: “lift up/stretch out the hands.” In biblical times a gesture of thanksgiving was the stretching out of the hand. But this term goes beyond the physical gesture to the inner attitude of thanksgiving.
11. “Praise, sing praise, make music”: *zamar*. This term appears some 26 times in Psalms as verb (e.g., Ps 21:13); 57 times as a noun in the Psalm superscriptions (e.g., Ps 23:1). Word picture: “make music with voice or instruments.” Here is praise worship involving vocal or instrumental music. Imagine the 288 trained singers at the Temple, and the 4000 Temple musicians, with the three antiphonal choirs led by Asaph and his cohorts!
12. “Praise, bless, kneel”: *bak*. This term appears some 40 times in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 72:13). Word picture: “kneel down in adoration/blessing/prayer.” An ancient custom for saluting some important person or deity was to bend the knee, acknowledging their right to respect and honor. Here is the Psalmist telling us to

“bend the knee,” in salutation and honor, not to Baal or the other heathen gods, but to the one true God.

13. “Praise, boast, glory”: *shabab*. This verb appears five times in the Psalms (Ps 63:4 [Eng. 3]; 106:47; 117:1; 145:4; 147:2) and is probably borrowed from Aramaic (see Dan 2:23; 4:31, 34). Word picture: some suggest “to soothe, stroke with praise,” while others suggest that this is a different verbal root, denoting “laud, praise.” Here is described the lauding of God’s worthiness, and perhaps implying the intimate “touch” or “stroke” of affection and praise that humans can give to God.
14. “Pray”: *hithpalel* [pray]. (Some 37 times in the Psalms.) Word picture: “to pray—especially to intercede [*palal*].” Here is emphasized God’s people in fervent, intercessory, prevailing prayer as part of their worship of God. This is the prevailing word for worship in the modern synagogue service.

Finally, a cluster of Hebrew terms, not translated as “worship,” nonetheless are often used in the context of Old Testament worship:

15. “Come, enter” (*bô*), “go, walk” (*halak*) “approach” (*nagash*), “draw near” (*qarab*). These terms are often paired with the vocabulary for worship in the Old Testament (see, e.g., 2 Ki 16:12-13; Ps 69:18; Isa 58:2; Eze 44:15-16), and portray the experience of drawing near to God in the worship experience.

This word-study approach can be extended into the New Testament, where the dominant Greek term is *proskynéÇ*, “prostrate oneself in reverence,” as in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup>

### **Topical Approach to Worship in the Old Testament**

The topical approach to worship in the Old Testament is often followed in the numerous articles and books have been written describing Old Testament worship. These studies

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<sup>7</sup>The verb *proskynéÇ* appears 59 times in the New Testament. See also other Greek words for worship in the New Testament: *gonypetéÇ* “fall on one’s knees [in homage before],” twelve times; *latreuÇ* “to serve,” 21 times; and *sebomai* “reverence, shrink back in fear, worship,” six times.

synthesize what elements the authors find most prominent in the Old Testament experiences of worship. For example, Barry Liesch outlines and discusses the following basic principles of Old Testament worship:<sup>8</sup>

1. Come into His Presence and Sing to Him
2. Offer Worship that Costs Something
3. Focus on the Character of God, especially His Transcendence.

As another example, Robert Webber, explores the following Old Testament foundations of worship:<sup>9</sup>

1. The saving-event orientation of worship (e.g., the Exodus)
2. The covenantal nature of worship, including obedience to God's word and ratification through sacrifice
3. The appointed times and places of worship
4. The response of the people: remembering, anticipating, and celebrating
5. The presence of "sign-acts" in worship, through which the people express their heart-felt response

In still another study of Old Testament worship, Andrew Hill explores the various dimensions of worship in separate chapters of his penetrating work:<sup>10</sup>

1. Personal piety (chap 2)
2. Sacred forms: sacrificial liturgy, covenant renewal liturgy, Temple liturgy (chap 4)
3. Sacred places: altars, places of theophany, tabernacle, and Temple (chap 5)
4. Sacred times: Sabbath and festivals (chap 6)
5. Sacred actions: including recitation (liturgical responses, singing, prayer, vows, preaching/teaching) and ritual drama (sacrifice, festivals, offerings, tithing, purification and penitential rites, and artistic response) (chap 7)

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<sup>8</sup>Barry Liesch, *People in the Presence of God: Models and Directions for Worship*, chap. 1, "Old Testament Principles," (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 21-35;

<sup>9</sup>Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 19-39.

<sup>10</sup>Hill, *Enter His Courts With Praise*.

6. Officials and leaders (king and priest, chap 8)
7. The Tabernacle/Temple in Hebrew worship (chap 9)
8. The Psalms in Hebrew worship (chap 10)
9. The arts and Hebrew worship (chap 11)
10. The typological aspect of Old Testament worship (chap 12)

### **Case Study Approach to Old Testament worship**

Another approach toward understanding Old Testament worship is to examine case studies in the Old Testament where worship is actually in progress. As a sample of this, Webber in one chapter of his book *Worship Old and New* analyzes Exodus 24:1-8 (God’s covenant-making service with Israel at Mt. Sinai), where he finds encapsulated “*the most basic structural elements for a meeting between God and his people. . . . the very substance of public worship*”.<sup>11</sup>

According to Webber, these include:

1. God’s call to worship
2. Full participation by the congregation
3. Proclamation of the Word
4. Personal commitment
5. Dramatic symbol

I concur that these are important formal elements of worship in ancient Israel, and that this “biblical case study” approach is a valuable one for laying bare essential aspects of biblical worship. But I am convinced that there is an even more foundational passage in the Old Testament on the nature of true worship—one that presents no less than a model for heavenly worship!

### **Heavenly Worship in the Old Testament**

There is one moment in Old Testament history (and in fact, in the whole of Scripture), where I find the most powerful portrayal of true worship in contrast with the distortion of true

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<sup>11</sup>Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 20-21. Italics his.

worship. It occurs in the experience of Isaiah. In the early chapters of Isaiah, we find the young prophet denouncing Israel's worship (see Isaiah 1:1-15). Isaiah calls for reforms—described in vv. 16-20. There exists formalism on one hand, and the sensuous, emotionally charged fertility cult worship on the other (see Isa 2:6, 8).

But what Isaiah did not realize was that he himself had also been affected and infected by the distortions of worship in his culture. This is implied by the juxtapositioning of Isaiah's call vision in chap 6 with these previous early messages of Isa 1-5. One commentator (Ellen White) makes this explicit: "Isaiah had denounced the sin of others; but now he sees himself exposed to the same condemnation he had pronounced upon them. He had been satisfied with a cold, lifeless ceremony in his worship of God. He had not known this until the vision was given him of the Lord."<sup>12</sup>

The vision given to Isaiah, I submit, as implicitly indicated in the positioning of Isaiah 6 in the book, was the antidote of false worship, a revelation of what constitutes true worship. It provides a model of heavenly worship for us.<sup>13</sup> Isaiah's false concept of worship represents the experience of many Christian's today, and God's corrective of that false concept is highly instructive for us as we seek to understand the nature of true worship.

The Isaianic model of worship is the only one in the Bible that takes us directly into the heavenly temple with worship in progress and links heavenly and earthly worship. Surely this "heavenly model" is one worth emulating on earth as we by faith join with the heavenly worship!

During my days here as a Seminary (M.Div.) student, I preached my first homiletics

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<sup>12</sup>*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 4:1139.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*: "The vision given to Isaiah represents the condition of God's people in the last days."

sermon (a five minute version!) on Isaiah 6 under the title, “Theophany for Theologians.” This passage has had a profound impact on my worship theology and practice over the years as pastor and as professor.<sup>14</sup>

Just recently— after musing on this passage for years, lecturing on Isaiah 6 and the “heavenly” model of worship in a seminary worship class for the last several years—I discovered that two prominent contemporary writers on the subject of worship have also emphasized the centrality of Isaiah 6 and the “heavenly” model in understanding and experiencing true worship. Robert Webber’s recent book on worship structures the whole worship experience around the model of Isaiah 6 (and its counterpart in Rev 4-5, which has the same heavenly worship dimension, but without the explicit connection to earthly worship). Webber points out that “When we worship, we ascend into the heavens and join heavenly worship, as did Isaiah.”<sup>15</sup> Barry Liesch characterizes this “worship in heaven” model as “timeless, overarching, comprehensive, and ‘architectonic.’ . . . the culminating model of worship. . . .It boggles the mind. It is new, yet old; it is revolutionary, yet offers continuity with the past. . . . It penetrates to the root of things, to the elemental, central, foundational. I believe,” Liesch concludes, “it

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<sup>14</sup>I owe many of the foundational insights into this passage to a book I read many years ago as a college student, by Von Ogden Vogt, *Art and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1921), in connection with a class in Aesthetics. The main headings in the section that follows are adapted from this old classic work dealing with the experience of worship.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 37. See his whole book for the outworking of the Isaiah 6 (Rev 4-5) “worship in heaven” model in contemporary worship settings.

holds the key to all the models.”<sup>16</sup> Let us explore the biblical vision of heavenly worship!

Here is the record of Isaiah’s vision, found in Isaiah 6:1-9a:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.

<sup>2</sup> Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

<sup>3</sup> And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!"

<sup>4</sup> And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

<sup>5</sup> So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."

<sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar.

<sup>7</sup> And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged."

<sup>8</sup> Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

<sup>9</sup> And He said, "Go . . .!"

Five major elements of true worship emerge from this vision.

## **Five Emerging Elements of Worship**

### **1. “Theophany”/Vision–God Appears! (Vv. 1-4)**

The first element of heavenly worship, according to the biblical vision of Isa 6, is “theophany”—God appears! Isaiah had a vision of God’s glory; a bit of the veil was removed from the real heavenly world, and He saw God as He is, seated upon His celestial throne in the heavenly sanctuary, in all the unsurpassed majesty and matchless radiance that he could bear in

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<sup>16</sup>Liesch, *People in the Presence of God*, 233; cf. his discussion of this, his “favorite” model, in the last four chapters of his book, pp. 233-287. Liesch focuses mainly upon Revelation 4-5, which he sees as a counterpart to Isaiah 6.

his humanity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>A number of recent commentators recognize that in this passage Isaiah not only comes to the earthly sanctuary in Jerusalem, but in vision is transported to the heavenly sanctuary. See, e.g., John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 74. Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja 1-12*, BKAT (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), 245-248. Cf. Franz Delitzsch, "Isaiah," *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972): 1:189: "Isaiah is here carried up into heaven; for although in other instances it was undoubtedly the earthly temple which was presented to the prophets view. . . yet here, as the description which follows clearly proves, the '*high and exalted throne*' is the *heavenly antitype* of the earthly throne which was formed by the ark of the covenant; and the 'temple' . . . is the temple in heaven" (italics original). Ellen White concurs: "In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah was permitted in vision to look into the holy place, and into the holy of holies in the heavenly sanctuary" (4 BC 1139 = *RH* Oct 16, 1888). This vision does not present mere metaphor for a God who lives outside of space and time, as many Christians today teach, based ultimately on a Platonic dualism of body and spirit and a notion of a timeless deity. See, e.g., John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, NIDOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 176: "Similarly, attempts to prove that the vision took place in either the earthly temple or a heavenly one are generally of no consequence. They are frequently based upon overly literal interpretations of an imagery whose primary purpose is to convey theological truth." In contrast, Seventh-day Adventists call for a radical return to Biblical realism in which God comes into space and time, and actually resides in a real, spatio-temporal Temple/Palace in heaven. On this issue, see especially Fernando Canale, "Philosophical Foundations and the Biblical Sanctuary," *AUSS* 36/2 (Autumn, 1998):183-206.

There are several dimensions of this theophany:

**Beauty.** There is first the aesthetic dimension, echoing Psalm 96:9—“O worship the Lord in the *beauty* of holiness!” Isaiah sees God in the beauty of His holiness. He witnesses the dazzling throne and the glorious train of the Lord filling the heavenly temple. The seraphim (angels whose name means “burning ones”) in awesome beauty are glowing with the glory of the Lord.

We see this aesthetic dimension echoed in several worship-related passages in the Old Testament. According to Ps 27:4, David’s single-minded quest in the sanctuary was “to behold the *beauty* of the Lord.” In the words of the 96<sup>th</sup> Psalm: “Strength and *beauty* are in His sanctuary” (vs. 6). In the inspired directions for construction of the sanctuary and later the Solomonic Temple, the externals of worship are described as breathtakingly beautiful. The holy garments of the priests were designed “for glory and beauty” (Exodus 28:1, 2, 40). The Temple was adorned with “precious stones for beauty” (2 Chron 3:6). The architecture of tabernacle/temple was spectacular, and virtually every conceivable type of art was employed in the construction: art in the round, sculpture, overlay with gold, silver, or bronze; engravings or decorations in bas-relief; giant quarried ashlar stones and massive cedar timbers; woven tapestry with rich fabrics, textures and colors. Moses utilized over a ton of gold and four tons of silver in constructing the tabernacle; Solomon employed 100,000 talents of gold—23,500 tons!—and one million talents of silver—35,000 tons!, and bronze beyond calculation of weight (1 Chron 22:14). This temple was undoubtedly one of the most, if not the most, magnificent structures of antiquity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Regarding the Solomonic temple, Ellen White writes, “This temple was the most magnificent building which the world ever saw. . . .the most magnificent structure ever reared by

Accompanying the architecture there was the beautiful music, with the book of Psalms comprising the Hymbook for the Temple worship; the Levitical choirs comprised of 288 singers (1 Chron 25:7), and 4000 instrumentalists playing musical instruments that David himself had designed and made (1 Chron 23:5). The liturgy at the sanctuary/Temple itself may be described as spectacular pageantry, as priests and worshipers enacted the drama of salvation.

According to the philosophers, there is a triple star of value: beauty, goodness, truth.<sup>19</sup> It seems that too often we devote much training to truth (doctrine), to goodness (ethics), but so little to beauty (aesthetics). Hence I spend a bit more time on this aspect than some of the others.

In my own experience the awakening to the importance and value of the beautiful in worship was almost as traumatic as some people's dramatic conversion to Christ. I was born in a utilitarian home, where it seemed that everything had to have a useful function. If it was not useful, then it was not worth doing. In college I started dating a girl whose background was saturated with the arts. We both were required to take a course in Aesthetics (The Study of Beauty), she as a music major and I as a theology major. During that course JoAnn and I sat together in the middle of the front row of the large band practice room, she with her fellow music majors beside and behind her, and I with theology major friends on my side of the room. The entire semester the theology majors (utilitarians with few exceptions!) fought with the artistic music majors. We theologians argued that we knew what was beautiful: if music was played in

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human hands. . . . There is no such building to be found in the world for beauty, richness, and spender." *Great Controversy*, 23, 414. Cf. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 1:1089.

<sup>19</sup>Ellen White's counsel to educators in our schools today is that "teachers should endeavor to awaken in students the love for goodness, truth, and beauty." *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 595.

an evangelistic meeting and it caused people to walk down the sawdust trail and give their hearts to Jesus—then it was beautiful music! No, said the music majors (and our organist professor Harold Hannum), there are principles of beauty; not all music that reaches the hearts of souls for Christ is necessarily beautiful music.

Jo Ann and I fought our individual battle; we actually broke up three times that semester, fighting over beauty! But finally, the last week of the class, I realized I was not really grasping what old Doc. Hannum was trying to get across, and told Jo Ann I would this time really try to be open to understand what she was saying. As she talked the lights finally came on inside my thick skull! I still have a copy of the final examination I wrote for that aesthetics class. I started out, “Dr. Hannum, this last week it is as if scales fell off my eyes, and I could see for the first time. . .” (I didn’t tell him that he didn’t have anything to do with it, that it was my girl friend that finally got through to me; you don’t always have to tell a professor the whole story!) I went on to describe how I finally understood that everything in life didn’t have to serve some utilitarian purpose; that I could stop and smell the roses just because they were beautiful, and not because their scent had any health-giving properties. I could just gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and His creation, because He and His handiwork are beautiful!

Since those debates in aesthetics class, I married Jo Ann, and she has continued to be an inspiration to me in areas of beauty. (In fact, she finished her Ph.D. in systematic theology, and wrote her doctoral dissertation on “A Theology of Beauty: Toward a Biblical Aesthetic.”) When I unconsciously fall back into my old utilitarian ways, she reminds me how the Old Testament (my area of study) highlights the beautiful.

When we finished college and seminary, we soon found ourselves pastoring a little church out in the woods in the mountain town of Flagstaff, Arizona. It was built by the church members themselves, based upon a rough sketch on a 3x5 card. Its beams were creosote-coated

telephone poles (that opened one's nasal passages every Sabbath upon entering the sanctuary!) and the roof was made of 2x4's laid on their ends (so heavy was the roof that it blew down three times in wind storms before they finally got it cinched together at the top). The church was homely looking inside and out—actually, downright ugly! But the members were not rich, and I had little hope of making any noticeable aesthetic improvements.

Then an Adventist architect moved to town. The first Sabbath he walked inside the back door of the church, looked up at the creaking telephone poles laden with the heavy weight of the 2x4's, and refused to stay in the sanctuary to worship (as he later confided to me, afraid that the building would collapse as we worshiped that windy Sabbath morning). But later, upon closer inspection, he was satisfied that the building was structurally sound, and joined in worship with us every Sabbath. Not long thereafter, he stated baldly to me in private, “This church is really ugly!” I replied, “Yes, I know that, but we don't have the money to make it beautiful.” His shocking comeback: “Do you have \$400? For a few hundred dollars we can make this sanctuary, inside and out, beautiful!” Of course, we could raise a few hundred dollars. And so, with some repairs on the cracked cement block, a fresh paint job, some bold colors for accent, real wood paneling in front, live plants inside and out, and a few other miscellaneous artistic touches under the guidance of the architect, our church looked beautiful! Inside it reminded me of the interior of the Mosaic sanctuary, with the sanctuary colors of yellow/gold, red, blue, purple, and white. I learned from that experience that it doesn't necessarily require a lavish outlay of funds to make the church sanctuary aesthetically attractive. But God asks us to give our best to make His house of worship beautiful, so that worshipers may be drawn upward to see the beauty of His character.

Isaiah's vision begins with a view of the matchless splendor of the King of Kings. But then He describes a second aspect of the theophany (vision of God):

**Praise.** Isaiah hears the antiphonal singing of the seraphim. One commentator (Ellen White) elaborates on this experience of the prophet:

As their songs of praise resounded in deep, earnest notes of adoration, the pillars of the gate trembled, as if shaken by an earthquake. These holy beings sang forth the praise and glory of God with lips unpolluted with sin. The contrast between the feeble praise which he had been accustomed to bestow upon the Creator and the fervid praises of the seraphim, astonished and humiliated the prophet.<sup>20</sup>

Praise is a vital ingredient in the Old Testament worship. As we have seen above, the Solomonic Temple highlighted music with the 288 professional singers forming antiphonal Levitical choirs and 4000 professional instrumentalists all paid by the tithe to praise God in song. The book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible is named *Tehillim*—“Praises.” In Psalm 22:3 David under inspiration writes: “But You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel!” According to the Psalmist David, our praises are actually the throne upon which the Lord sits in the earthly worship experience! In the “Psalm of Thanksgiving” (Psalm 100) the people of God, in OT times as well as today, hears the call to praise and thanksgiving as they enter the sanctuary to worship the Creator:

Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands!

<sup>2</sup> Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing.

<sup>3</sup> Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

<sup>4</sup> Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.

<sup>5</sup> For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, And His truth endures to all generations.

We not only enter the *earthly* courts to worship with praise and thanksgiving; we are invited to follow Isaiah into the *heavenly* Temple and join with the worship in progress around

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<sup>20</sup>White, 4 BC 1140.

the throne of the King of Kings (see especially the fourfold invitation to come to the heavenly sanctuary in Heb 4:16; 6:19-20; 10:19-22; and 12:22-24). “Music forms a part of God’s worship in the courts above, and we should endeavor, in our songs of praise, to approach as nearly as possible the harmony of the heavenly choirs.”<sup>21</sup> As we come to the earthly house of worship every week, let us imagine that we are joining with the “fervid praises of the seraphim” in the heavenly Temple!

**Holiness.** A third dimension of the vision of God (or theophany) in worship is the encounter with divine holiness. In the heavenly worship scene of Isaiah 6, the seraphim adore His character, but note the character trait that is paramount in their antiphonal praise: “*Holy, Holy, Holy* is the Lord of Hosts!” God’s fundamental attribute is holiness; the seraphim repeat “Holy” three times, a Hebrew method of expressing the superlative. Some may wonder if Isaiah in vision entered the heavenly worship during one of many stanzas extolling various attributes of God’s character, and happened to hear the stanza about God’s holiness. However, when we compare Revelation 4:8, the New Testament companion passage depicting heavenly worship, the four living creatures are still singing “Holy, Holy, Holy!” There is no threefold repetition of – “love, love, love,” or “goodness, goodness, goodness” in the Bible. To be sure, the Bible emphasizes love and goodness, but it is “holy love” and “holy goodness.” In Scripture holiness “embraces every distinctive attribute” and is “the outshining of all that God is . . . in His self-manifestation all the attributes of God come together and blend into holiness.”<sup>22</sup> In Psalm 99:3, 5, 9, again we find the threefold call “Holy is He!” as the ground of worship.

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<sup>21</sup>White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 594.

<sup>22</sup>R. A. Finlayson, “Holiness, Holy Saints,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 530.

In the passage we noted earlier in discussing beauty in worship, Ps 96:6, the aspect of holiness in worship is also mentioned: “Worship the Lord in the beauty of *Holiness*.” The foundational appeal of both Old Testament and New is “Be holy, for I am holy!”<sup>23</sup> “Holiness is the foundation of God’s throne.”<sup>24</sup> In churches where there is great emphasis upon God’s love, it seems that God’s holiness is often all but forgotten. In the desire to bask in the acceptance of God’s love, there is a neglect to realize that first must come a sense of the contrast between a infinitely pure and holy God and our impurity, sinfulness and finitude.

“Holiness” (*qadosh*) in Hebrew has a primary meaning of “separation.” God is the absolutely unique One, separate in His transcendence (“beyond or without limits”). He is the one “Wholly Other.” The holiness of God reveals itself in an expression of His majesty and awesome grandeur; He is the One who “dwells in unapproachable light, Whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16; cf. Exod 34:20-23).<sup>25</sup>

In the vision of worship in heavenly sanctuary, Isaiah “was overwhelmed with a sense of the purity and holiness of God.”<sup>26</sup> Once Isaiah caught this vision of God’s holiness, it never left

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<sup>23</sup>Lev 11:44, 45; 19:2, 45; 20:7, 26; 21:8, 32; 1 Pet 1:16.

<sup>24</sup>White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 145.

<sup>25</sup>Holiness is also an expression of God’s separation from all immoral defilements, an expression of His perfect moral character. Thus humans are to emulate God’s holiness in their own sphere by moral rectitude. Holiness also implies “separation to” in the sense of relationship, and as we will see below, this aspect of holiness pervades the entire worship service as humans come into relation with the divine in worship.

<sup>26</sup>White, *Prophets and Kings*, 307.

him. His favorite phrase for God became the “Holy one of Israel” (24 times in Isaiah). Isaiah’s experience in worship needs to be ours.<sup>27</sup> Before we worship God as our intimate friend, we must first catch a glimpse of Him in His infinite holiness. I believe this is the most fundamental point in worship; it is our great need today, the most important way to revitalize our worship experience. In a secular age when nothing is regarded as holy, we must recapture the sense of the transcendent, holy God. All else in worship will spontaneously flow from an encounter with God in His infinite holiness. This leads us to our next major division of the “heavenly” model of worship.

## **2. Humility/Reverence (V. 5)**

The second main element of heavenly worship, according to Isa 6, is reverence or humility. Throughout Scripture, there is a consistent, natural human response to theophany—to viewing God’s majestic beauty, seeing Him lifted up amid strains of fervid praise, and especially sensing His awesome holiness. Isaiah spontaneously cried out at the sight: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5). Commentator Ellen White elaborates and applies to our own worship experience:

In the light of this matchless radiance that made  
manifest all he could  
bear in the revelation

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<sup>27</sup>Note that in Jewish Synagogue worship, the *Amidah* (18 Blessings) which comes early in the service, emphasizes the foundational character of God’s holiness. In the Christian church, God’s holiness is also underscored as foundational to worship (see Rev 4:8).

of the divine  
character, his own  
inward defilement  
stood out before him  
with startling  
clearness. His very  
words seemed vile to  
him. Thus when the  
servant is permitted to  
behold the glory of  
the God of heaven, as  
He is unveiled to  
humanity, and  
realizes to a slight  
degree the purity of  
the Holy One of  
Israel, he will make  
startling confessions  
of the pollution of his  
soul, rather than  
proud boasts of his  
holiness.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>White, 4 *BC* 1140.

Notice how this expression of humility and unworthiness is the regular response of Old Testament figures as they encounter the holy God:

**Jacob** (Genesis 28:16-17, after his vision of the ladder to heaven): “And he was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!’”

**Moses** at the burning bush (Exodus 34:8, when the Lord showed His glory): “So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped.”

**Job** (Job 42:5-6, after God’s theophany): “Now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

**Joshua** (Joshua 5:14, when the Commander of the Lord’s host appeared): “Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped.”

**Ezekiel** (Ezekiel 1:28, after seeing the vision of God’s glory): “So when I saw it, I fell on my face.”

**Daniel** (Daniel 10:5-8, when he saw the pre-incarnate Christ appear to him): “No strength remained in me; my vigor was turned to frailty in me, and I retained no strength. . . . on my face, with my face to the ground.”

**Israel** as a whole at Sinai (Exodus 33:10), at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:3), at the reconsecration of the temple by Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:29-30), at the reading of the Torah by Ezra (Nehemiah 8:6).

**The Heavenly hosts** also have this experience (Nehemiah 9:6)!

The Psalmist in Psalm 96:9 not only admonishes, “Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!” He also immediately adds, “*Tremble* before Him, all the earth.” There is something about the awesome majesty and piercing holiness of God that causes a person to tremble.

This is the natural response to theophany—to bow in reverence and humility before Him.

This is the meaning of the word “worship”—*hishtahawah*—to “bow down, *bend down*, prostrate oneself” before the Holy One. Bowing down is an appropriate physical gesture for the worship hour, especially at the beginning of the service as we come into the divine presence; it also represents an inner attitude of awe and humility, as in Old Testament times.

Many congregations struggle to maintain a sense of reverence in the sanctuary during worship service. There are external worship features and settings that can assist in promoting

reverence, but I find that the root source of reverence is the realization that God is present in the sanctuary in His infinite greatness and holiness—or better, the realization that by faith we are in His majestic holy presence in the heavenly Temple—which spontaneously brings us to our knees in awe and humility and confession of our own unworthiness before the King of Kings.<sup>29</sup>

*This response of humility and reverence before the matchless holiness of our Creator is not an optional experience in true worship, not just one model among many!* It is the experience of the angels in heavenly worship (both Old Testament and New Testament); it is the experience of Israel at the earthly sanctuary; it is the meaning of the main word for “worship” in the Hebrew Bible. It is still at the heart of worship for us today.

### **3. Salvation–Forgiveness/Cleansing–Vitality (Vv. 6-7)**

The third main element of heavenly worship experienced by Isaiah is salvation, forgiveness, cleansing. After Isaiah utters his cry of humility, awe, and unworthiness, the seraph comes with the living coal from off the heavenly altar of incense, answers the cry with a touch on the lips, and pronounces Isaiah purified. In the Old Testament earthly sanctuary, the contrite worshipers came to the altar of sacrifice and receive assurance of forgiveness. In the worship experience today, once we have sensed our sinfulness and unworthiness in the presence of a holy God, and express our cry of penitence to the Father, He is eager to send the burning coal from off the altar to touch our lips. We receive forgiveness and cleansing, and are assured of our acceptance with God.

This is the message of the Gospel! There must be a time in today’s worship services when penitent worshipers receive the burning coal from the heavenly altar of incense

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<sup>29</sup>As Ellen White puts it, “True reverence is inspired by a sense of His infinite greatness and a realization of His presence.” *Prophets and Kings*, 48.

(representing Christ's righteousness), and renew their assurance of forgiveness and cleansing based upon the righteousness of Christ. We need a time in the worship service to celebrate this forgiveness and cleansing with vigorous spiritual songs of experience, and with spirited and heartfelt testimonies of how God has worked in the lives of the worshipers and in the lives of those with whom they have shared the Gospel during the last week. What vitality this can bring to the worship service, and to the worshipers!

#### **4. Illumination/Proclamation of the Word (V. 8)**

Once purified, Isaiah was ready to hear God speak His word. Isaiah records in v. 8: "Then [after I was purified] I heard the voice of the Lord." This is the fourth element of heavenly worship emerging from Isaiah's experience: illumination through the proclamation of the Word. It was the responsibility of the priests in the temple service to instruct the worshipers in the will of God when then came to worship.<sup>30</sup> Note the example of Ezra in the worship renewal service at Jerusalem, when he read the words of the Torah, and "gave the sense and helped them understand the meaning" (Nehemiah 8:8).

As with Isaiah's experience, and with worship in ancient Israel as a whole, proclamation of the Word must be central in our corporate worship as well as the individual devotional time. One of the most common complaints I hear from church members of local congregations as I travel from place to place in the here in the USA and abroad, conducting seminars and other meetings, is that many of our pastors are no longer feeding the flock adequately with Bible-based, nourishing, substantive sermons expounding the Word! The people cry out, We don't want pablum, we want

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<sup>30</sup>Note God's blessing to Levi (and his descendants), through Moses, in Deuteronomy 33:10: "They shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law."

the solid food from the Word! Let us hear the Word of the Lord from our pulpits each week, faithfully and powerfully proclaimed!

#### **5. Enlistment/Dedication (V. 9)**

Finally, the fifth element of heavenly worship, according to Isaiah's vision, is enlistment or dedication. As part of His proclamation [v. 9], the Lord asks, "Who will go?" Isaiah responds, "Here am I; send me." Isaiah dedicates all to Him, places his life at God's disposal, willing to go and do what God asks him to. This is the same response God desired of Israel at the sanctuary as they listened to the instruction of the priests and prophets. Out of grateful hearts for what God has done for them, God called His people to discipleship. He desires to receive the same response of dedication and enlistment from the worshipers today.

The call from the Lord goes forth from this pulpit this morning, "Whom will I send? Who will go for Us?" Who will go with Isaiah to the heavenly temple, who will join with the seraphim, the burning ones surrounding the throne singing His praise, who will fall on their face in responding to His awesome majesty and piercing holiness, who will cry out, "Woe is me, for I am undone, for I have seen the King!" Who will receive the coal from on high, touching our lips, removing our iniquity, purging our sin? Who will proclaim God's word, His word regarding heavenly worship? Who will respond in dedication and enlistment—to dare to actualize this biblical vision of heavenly worship in their churches? Who will say, "Here am I, Lord. Send me!"?

[If that is your response, I invite you back this afternoon, to the wrap-up session of this Conference, as we explore practical principles and venues and strategies to actualize the biblical vision of heavenly worship! Amen.]