

## Worship, Idolatry, and God

O God ! if I worship Thee in fear of Hell,  
burn me in Hell;  
and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise,  
exclude me from Paradise;  
but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake,  
withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty !<sup>1</sup>

Worship, particularly when viewed as the expression of a heart overflowing with the love of God, has been praised in virtually all religious traditions. In the Hebrew-derived traditions—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—the caveat of the Q Document is echoed again and again: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.”<sup>2</sup> Hence there is an instinctive positive reponse to this *ṣūfī* lady’s prayer with its evident sincerity. Instinctive reactions can, nonetheless, be misleading.

In the cultures in which many of us have been reared, propriety and good taste dictate that a good person will profess a belief in God, worship him regularly in church or synagogue, and lead a moral life. Of those who conform to this minimum standard, few questions are asked; those who depart from any portion of it will find little reckoned to their credit. When support for this popular notion is sought in the Bible, however, few passages appear to echo the oft-repeated injunction, “Bow the knee and become religious.”

The first element of the standard may have little religious importance, as the author of the Epistle of James clearly perceived—“You believe that

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God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (Jas 2: 19)—suggesting that belief in God per se does not mark one as necessarily better than a demon. Throughout the Bible, faith, not simple belief, is emphasized; and faith and belief can never be equated. Faith is the opposite of unconcern, not of disbelief. Disbelief is the opposite of belief, yet faith embraces both. This point is rarely appreciated by those who, with their security slipping from them, ask, “But you do believe in God, don’t you?” A bland “yes” that considers the implications of neither the term “God” nor the term “believe” reassures them; a thoughtful response, seeking more precise content for either term, frequently proves unnerving.

The third element in the series may be largely a product of community judgment, inasmuch as “moral” must be understood at least in terms of its etymology—from *mos, moris* (“manner, custom, habit”). So-called “moral” behavior can hide a heart of stone, and the prophets of Israel habitually directed their barbs not against the ungodly but against the practitioners of conventional religion and morality (cf Amos 4: 1–6; 5: 21–27; Jer 7). The middle third of the conventional description, however, is the focus of this paper: the worship of God and its correlate, the prohibition of the worship of idols.

Professor Myers, to whom this volume of essays is being offered, delighted in challenging many current views. Shibboleth after shibboleth came under his prophetic scrutiny. This essay therefore attempts to apply some of the same rigor—although not necessarily at all the same beliefs—to the criticism of popular views of belief, worship, and morality as the essence of man’s duty before the Almighty.

#### WORSHIP: VALUE STRUCTURE AND DEFERENCE

Current English usage tends to equate worship with an attitude or feeling. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s speech on “The Nature of Religion” turned on “perception, feeling and activity,”<sup>3</sup> and his stress on the internal nature of the religious experience has profoundly influenced our religious legacy. Dictionary definitions of the word “worship” stress such synonyms as “honor,” “intense love,” “admiration,” and the like, linking it with words like “awe” and “adoration.” Its etymology, however, is via Middle English *worschip*, from Anglo-Saxon *weorhscipe*, clearly expressing a value judgment. Any object of worship must therefore appear higher on an individual’s scale of values than some object that is not worshiped. Worship then implies a commitment to what is regarded as of highest value. In this sense, everyone worships if he has ever taken the trouble to reject a lower value for a higher

one. Whether it accords with any conventional definition or not, whatever a person will sacrifice all other values for is his God.

Thus it would seem appropriate to urge that only what is ‘truly’ God be worshiped and, as the *sūfi* lady sang, for his own sake, not for fear of hell or for hope of paradise; for either of these would make hell or paradise of greater “worth” than God, and hence the object of worship. The religious question, according to H. N. Wieman, then emerges: “What ultimate commitment will deliver me from the false and superficial level of life and enable me to live myself out to the full with whatever struggle and suffering and courage and ecstasy this may involve?” But that such commitment implies anything like a conventional “belief in God” was refuted by Wieman, who went on to say: “The word ‘God’ is irrelevant to the religious problem unless the word is used to refer to *whatever in truth* operates to save man from evil and to the greater good *no matter how much this operating reality may differ from all traditional beliefs about it.*”<sup>4</sup> Hence, the highest value one knows is his object of worship, and if it is a matter of ultimate concern, that object is his god.<sup>5</sup>

#### BODILY POSTURE

To understand worship either as an emotional state or as commitment to a value structure reflects an interiorization and modernization never implicit in ancient forms, despite the Anglo-Saxon derived meaning of the word in English. Outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition, a different usage appears. In Zen Buddhism, for example, the normal word corresponding to “worship” is a verb meaning simply “to sit.” In Hindu meditative practices, the word used means “to sit down to.” When we divorce our thinking from the interiorization that characterizes much of modern religious thought, worship shows itself as something done far more than as something felt, thought, or valued. When, for example, a Japanese worshiper presents himself before a Shinto shrine, he first washes his hands in a prescribed manner and then stands before the shrine’s closed doors, bowing his head and clapping his hands. What does it stand for? “Clap! Clap!” That’s what it stands for; that’s what it is.

The “service” of worship is again something done, typically as a dramatic representation of an archetypal event, presented as a perpetual *da capo* to re-present the saving event being recalled.<sup>6</sup> The service is neither mere history nor mere drama; it is a dramatic remembrance, recollection, or reminder (*anamnesis*). Costume and mask play their roles, abstracting the officiant so that only “the minister” or “the priest” remains. As the assigned roles of the liturgy are acted out, the personalities of the worshiper and the officiant are sublimated to the powers they represent.

In the Hebrew scriptures, which are the special concern of this essay, only three words are commonly rendered into English as "worship." In connection with the "worship" of the Queen of Heaven, Jeremiah (44: 19) uses *'āṣāb* ("pained, grieved, thwarted," by extension "to worship"), but this may be a spurious reading, and it is omitted in the RSV. In Daniel, the word is typically *sāqad*, with *l'* ("fall down," "prostrate"). But the most important term is *šohoh* ("bow down"), implying a usage similar to the essential meaning of "worship" in other Eastern spiritual systems. *Šohoh* is something done, whether felt or not. It need not be used with an object.

When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation [i.e., of the tent destroyed by the barley cake], he worshiped. (Judg 7: 15)

[After receiving news of the destruction of his family] Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell on the ground, and worshiped. (Job 1: 20)

And Moses made haste to bow his head toward the earth, and worshiped. (Ex 34: 8)

The whole assembly worshiped. . . . And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped. (2 Chron 29: 28, 30)

When the word does have specific reference, God or YHWH is not normally the object, although the Second Isaiah foretells the "worship" of YHWH's suffering servant (Is 49: 7); however, the real meaning of this passage is the vision of other nations bowing low before Israel.

The act of worship (bowing) is an automatic response in the presence of power, or else it is an auspicious act performed for its own sake. After the death of David's first child by Bathsheba, following a period of fasting and intercession,

David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of YHWH, and worshiped; he then went to his own house. (2 Sam 12: 20)

When Naaman was to be cured of his leprosy, he also worshiped, without the specification of any object of the verb (2 Kings 5: 18); when a wife was finally found for Isaac, "the man bowed his head and worshiped YHWH" (Gen 24: 26—J); and when Samuel and Saul split over Saul's failure to annihilate all the Amalakites, "Saul worshiped YHWH" (1 Sam 15: 31). These last two instances would seem to negate our principles, but closer inspection shows that in both cases the construction of the Hebrew sentence is literally, "worship toward YHWH." The parallelism expressed in "bow the head and worship" confirms the meaning (cf Ex 4: 31; 12: 27), and the conception

of worship as an important act to be pursued in its own right can be seen in such an illustration as the case of Abraham, who "said to his young man, 'Stay here with the ass; I and the lad [Isaac] will go yonder and worship'" (Gen 22: 5—E). In the temple and out of it, worship implies primarily a prostration, a bowing. Elkanah, father of Samuel, went up to the temple to worship and sacrifice (1 Sam 1: 3), and Samuel himself worshiped before YHWH in the Temple (1 Sam 1: 19, 28). The theophany to Joshua may be as instructive an incident as any. While reconnoitering Jericho before the siege, Joshua met the commander of YHWH's army in a vision, "and Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and worshiped, and said to him, 'What does my lord bid his servant?' And the commander of YHWH's army said to Joshua, 'Put off your shoes from your feet.'" (Josh 5: 14; cf Num 22: 22 and 2 Kings 6: 17.)

#### DEFERENCE

On the other hand, the act of worship, *šohoh*, may have an external reference because it is usually performed with reference to the presence of power before which man defers. When cultic worship is performed, worshiper and priest are both depersonalized, and the act itself becomes the bearer of power and the reintegrator of life:

. . . in the cult the actual agent is not man nor the human community, but sacred Power, whether this is merely the sacred common element or a sacred will. In worship, therefore, "to do," "to act," is always sacramental. Something different and something more is done than what is actually performed: things are manipulated to which man himself is not superior; he stands *within* a sacred activity and not above this. He does not govern, that is to say, but serves.<sup>7</sup>

A worshiper at shrine, mosque, church, or temple may be as little aware of the nuances of theology as a native speaker cares about the fine points of grammar. Nonetheless, he feels compelled to practice his devotion in certain prescribed ways that show due deference to the object of his faith: to bow, to prostrate, to gaze, perhaps to touch, to kiss, or to share food or drink. On a sophisticated level, intellectual assent or understanding of what is being done may be expected, but the actions themselves are not so much expressions of value structures as they are the spontaneous, physical expressions of the urge to do something in the presence of power, either to submit to it or to appropriate it. Power is apprehended in many ways. Stephen did mighty works because the power of God was poured out on him (Acts 6: 8), and Peter, likewise full of the power of God, caused a lame man to walk (Acts 3: 6). By deferring before the power, the worshiper may

lay claim to it. Hence, in classical Roman Catholic theology, grace is a measurable substance that can be dispensed by the Church. A benediction is not merely sweet words—nor is a malediction simply an insult—but the conveyance of power, the power of God, for good or for ill.

All these ideas are present in the Bible in some measure, and herein its universal character is revealed. But the distinctive features of the Bible appear when it is seen that these universal ideas are not controlling. Man deferring before God seeks to be either his slave or his master, for deference can be a form of control fully as much as a form of submission. Certainly the Bible contains its share of men who have attempted to be God's masters as well as those who have groveled before him, but the dominant note throughout Hebrew scriptures is the presentation of man neither as God's master nor as God's slave but as God's interpreter:

When the prophets discovered the living God, they discovered at the same time the life of man as a free, responsible, *human* person. . . . The prophet is one who stands in God's presence, and having listened to him, speaks to man on his behalf.<sup>8</sup>

#### NO GODS BEFORE YHWH

When Muhammad proclaimed, "There is no god [*al lah*] except God [*Allah*]," he was scarcely more insistent than the Deuteronomist who phrased the first Commandment as "You shall have no other gods before me [lit. 'face' or 'presence']" (Deut 5: 7). This verse and those that follow deserve careful reading. The commandment is "You shall *have* no other gods" except YHWH, and "You shall not *make* for yourself a graven image . . ." and "you shall not *bow down* [*šohoh*] to them" (Deut 5: 8, 9). Significantly, the word for "worship" is bracketed with idols and not with YHWH. Also, the command concerning YHWH is a prohibition, something not to be done before his face, not a demand that something be done.

#### NOT TO BOW DOWN TO THEM

Hebrew scriptures say little about worshiping before God, and even less about "worshiping God," but they are unequivocal in prohibiting the worship of anything that is not God. The horror of making a gesture of obeisance to anything that is not God obsesses many biblical writers.

According to the Deuteronomist, the cardinal sin was the worship of false gods. His strictures are well known:

If you forget YHWH your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish. (Deut 8: 19)

Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and serve other gods and worship them. (Deut 11: 16)

But if . . . you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day that you shall perish. (Deut 30: 17-18)

And there is the unequivocal, ringing statement of the Decalog:

You shall have no other gods before me [lit. "before my face"]. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I YHWH your God am a jealous God. . . . (Deut 5: 7-9)

Deut 17: 3 and 29: 26 also warn against serving and worshiping alien gods. Deuteronomic literature abounds in such strictures (cf 1 Kings 9: 6; 9: 9; 11: 33; 16: 31; 22: 53; and parallel material in 2 Chron 7: 19, 22; 32: 12). Even the book of Jeremiah contains an indictment that must have come originally from deuteronomic circles (Jer 16: 11).

But to what were the Deuteronomists objecting? Were they conducting a kind of celestial beauty contest, propagandizing for the worship of their favorite deity, YHWH, instead of the god Ba'al of their Canaanite neighbors? Not really. The commandment not to worship Ba'al is not equivalent to the command to worship YHWH; two entirely different frames of references are involved. From the days of Elijah, it was no longer possible for any thinking person in the mainstream of Hebrew tradition to equate YHWH with the forces of nature on which the life of the world depends. On Mount Horeb, Elijah was confronted by an earthquake, wind, and a fire, but YHWH was not in them (1 Kings 19). These mighty manifestations of nature were followed by a "still small voice," and, contrary to popular exegeses of this verse, YHWH was not in the voice either. When the phenomena of nature were silenced, Elijah became conscious of the presence of the living God—a God whose life is in no way dependent upon the world in which he works, who can be neither represented nor worshiped in any of the conventional ways common to human religions.

This scene marks the turning point in Israel's religion, a clear expression of the otherness of God. A confrontation of the living God does not call for contemplation but for hearing his voice and obeying. No wonder the deuteronomic editor saw in Elijah's experience a parallel to that of Moses, the great leader whose faithful obedience and courageous faith gave birth to the community of Israel. Moses' obedience was given a new significance by this action of Elijah. Other prophets followed. Isaiah taunts him who

worships the work of his own hands (Is 2: 8), and promises that in the days of righteousness to come "men will cast forth their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship" (Is 2: 20). Jeremiah condemns the worship of the work of one's own hands (Jer 1: 16), warning those who "go after other gods to serve and worship them" (Jer 13: 10; 25: 6; cf 22: 9). Micah sees a day when man shall no longer bow down to images (Mic 5: 13), and the Second Isaiah sets forth the ludicrous situation of a goldsmith making a god and then falling down and worshipping it (Is 46: 6).

Not only do biblical writers condemn the worship of man-made objects, including Aaron's golden calf (Ex 32: 21-35; cf also Ps 106: 19-22), special venom is reserved for the worship of heavenly objects. The fall of Samaria came about, so they said, "because they worshiped the hosts of heaven" (2 Kings 17: 16-18) and, possibly in reaction to Manasseh's worship of the hosts of heaven (2 Kings 21: 9, 21), Deuteronomy contains stern prohibitions, saying of the stars, they are "things which YHWH your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven" (Deut 4: 19). Against the worship of anything in the heavens above (cf 2 Chron 33: 3; Jer 8: 2; Ezek 8: 16), it is urged, "You shall worship no other god, for YHWH, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Ex 34: 14-J).

Deuteronomy and many other books of the Hebrew scriptures breathe a spirit of confidence, but in the face of such certainty, some questions intrude. That most of the writers whose works are preserved in the Old Testament consistently oppose idolatry, who can deny? That they understood what they were condemning, who can confidently affirm? That they really practiced what they preached, who, in the face of the evidence, can convincingly demonstrate?<sup>9</sup>

The first of these caveats is obvious. Deuteronomy speaks for the dominant community when it legislates:

If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, "Let us go after other gods," which you have not known, "and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. . . . But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage. . . . (Deut 13: 1-5)

Such severe penalties may indicate widespread disregard of this principle in non-deuteronomistic circles. That the Deuteronomists understood what they were condemning or that they lived consistently with their preaching is not so easy to demonstrate.

A basic question emerges: What, then, is an idol? Without raising this question to a larger frame of reference, answer is impossible. Collectively, the god-figures of the world project into a cosmic setting man's search for salvation—that is, the transformation of his existence. The salvation sought for is usually presented in the recollection (*anamnesis*) of a narrative (*Geschichte*) which depicts the life of the gods. Functionally, gods—whether in India, Greece, Canaan, or Israel—are not so much independent entities as they are projections of man's search for significance and meaning. An idol, Erich Fromm notes, "represents the object of man's central passion: the desire to return to the soil-mother, the craving for possession, power, fame, and so forth."<sup>10</sup> The idol, then, is the reification or objectification of our basic needs, the consecration of a portion of human power and human value.

That is to say, an idol exists in order to be worshiped because it functions precisely as the projection of a value, a *worth*. Contrary to the too-limited perception of deuteronomistic books, idols are not *things*. They are not objects that represent deities, nor are deities identical with the objects. Idols represent unifying forces around which life can be structured, and by offering a symbolic sacrifice, one is saying of the value represented by the idol, "This is worth more than that." Idols are not things, and idolatry is not belief—at least not in any simple sense. The idol is valorization of a portion of human power and of humanity's basic drives; idolatry is a means of living harmoniously with that power and exploiting it to serve human ends.

What are some of these basics? The need for food and shelter and, in most climates, clothing. The need for satisfying human relations, including meaningful sexual union. The drive for power, including accumulation of possessions and power over other people. Indeed, the list is endless, for veneration of idols is veneration of certain means of obtaining whatever is designated as the good life, including the nation-state, the flag—a totemic emblem—ideals of economics, or even particularly strong attitudes about the proper length of skirts or hair.

There are positive values associated with the worship of idols, and Old Testament writers did not always realize that they had fallen prey to the same tendencies they fought vigorously to avoid. Because they misread what they were condemning, considering the idol itself as a god, the Deuteronomist isolated himself from the thought world about him. Yet, no biblical writer could deny human nature. Man must consecrate his powers, and it may be argued that it is healthier to recognize certain basic drives and venerate them intelligently than to suppress them. "More than one hundred years ago," Richard Rubenstein writes,

Heine warned that the rejected gods of the Teutons slumbered but had not died. When Thor awoke with his mighty hammer, there would be played out on the European scene a catastrophe which would make the French Revolution seem like child's play. We have lived through that drama. The grandeur of the Torah is that it never permitted a comparable split within the Jewish psyche. The priests of ancient Israel wisely never suffered Jahweh entirely to win his war with Baal, Astarte and Anath. That is why Jews were never Puritans, cut off from their inner life and the powers of the earth which engendered it. Paganism was transformed, but not entirely done away with in Judaism. In the redemption of the first born son . . . for example, the murderous quality of paganism was deflected, but its essential insight into the hostility between the generations was retained. . . . In the twentieth century, we have learned much concerning the futility of repression in personal matters. The Torah instinctively and intuitively understood this long ago in religious matters . . . . It understood the paradoxical truth that one can best overcome atavisms and primitivisms, in so far as they are destructive, by acknowledging their full potency and attractiveness and channeling their expression to eliminate their harm.<sup>11</sup>

Biblical literature, then, seems ambivalent in that in the midst of its harsh condemnation of idols, it does not entirely do away with idolatry—indeed, the Bible itself is a kind of idol—but it warns over and over against the absolutizing of a relative. This is what is meant by the prohibition against bowing down to that which is not God. “You shall *have* no other gods. . . . You shall not *make* a graven image. . . . You shall not *bow down*” to what is not an object of ultimate concern (Deut 5: 8, 9). Jewish rituals, as they were later formulated, reacted to the tragic existence man experiences as he is caught up in the swirl of the world's uncontrollable powers. By subconsciously incorporating some of the basic apprehensions of the Canaanites into their ritual, Israel expressed the deep-seated need of men to objectify their powers and consecrate them so that benefit rather than harm would result.

It came out of disguise when least expected. In sacrificial offerings of the Temple services as well as in *kashruth*, Jews were enjoined to return the blood of the slaughtered animal to the earth before consumption of the rest of the animal was permitted. Is this not one of the oldest offerings made by man to thank and appease their cannibal Earth-mother? By offering Earth the blood, in which the soul was found, it was hoped that the rest of the animal would be permitted.<sup>12</sup>

In the broadest sense, some veneration of idols is inevitable. Danger strikes when the idol becomes the end of the search, and here the biblical injunction breaks through with new force. True religion will always be iconoclastic. In this regard, even the weapons of the biblical writers used

to smash idols can themselves become idols if they arrest the process of denunciation of the gods.

#### NOT TO HAVE ANOTHER GOD

By prohibiting the worship of Ba'al, the Bible did not offer as an alternative simply a command to bow down to YHWH. Although there are prescriptions for the proper mode of making sacrificial offerings, the word “worship” (*sohah*) does not appear in the priestly legislation of Leviticus or Numbers. What, then, is involved?

Worship of idols—perhaps worship itself—reifies the spiritual dimensions of man's response to reality. By objectifying a value and bowing down before it, a worshiper transfers his own passions and qualities to the object, impoverishing himself to strengthen his shadow. What he worships is not even himself but the shadow of himself. Such a worship experience is stifling, limiting, and growth-inhibiting. “Man, trying to be like God,” says Fromm,

is an open system, approximating himself to God; man, submitting to idols, is a closed system, becoming a thing in himself. The idol is lifeless; God is living. The contradiction between idolatry and the recognition of God is, in the last analysis, that between the love of death and the love of life.<sup>13</sup>

Israel's prophets, however, were quick to see that an idolized god remains an idol. When anything is made the object of intense concern, so that it admits no rival, it becomes an idol, even if that intense concern be sanctioned in the name of YHWH or of Jesus Christ. The mere addition of such a name cannot insure that the policy sanctioned thereby is not another projection of selfish ideals. The Deuteronomist and the Chronicler recoil in horror at the report of Hiel of Bethel, who “built Jericho” and “laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his first-born, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub” (1 Kings 16: 34), a common practice designed to insure the security and permanence of such a construction or, at the report of the ritual slaughter of infants, to appease the hungry earth deities so that the nation can survive. Yet these activities were performed in good faith, with the best of motives, to secure compelling power for the preservation of a social order. From a phenomenological point of view, the mass sacrifice of a nation's sons on a distant battlefield in order to oppose an alien ideology considered demonic differs only in that the present slaughter is more widespread and devastating than that of the Hebrews or of the Canaanites. That it is performed in the name of God against “godless” forces means only that a shadow of the living God has been invoked as the sanction for an idolatrous worship.

## THE PROHIBITION OF IDOLS

It is evident that the prohibition of idols in its essential and radical form includes a prohibition against idolizing God. The commands "You shall have no other gods," "you shall not make for yourself a graven image," and "you shall not bow down to them," are not convertible into "You shall have YHWH, make a graven image of him, and prostrate yourself before it." The demand in Deut 5: 8 is negative; its obverse comes in the following chapter:

Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our God, and YHWH only;  
and you shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and  
with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut 6: 4)<sup>14</sup>

The positive commandment is not to *worship* YHWH but to *love* him with the totality of one's self. The commandment continues, "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall *serve* him. . . ." (Deut 6: 13).<sup>15</sup> Love, fear, serve—these are commanded; worship is not.

Prophetic Israel sensed the futility of placing faith in worship. The following examples are typical:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
says the LORD;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of he-goats.

When you come to appear before me,  
who requires of you

this trampling of my courts?

Bring no more vain offerings. . . . (Is 1: 11-13a)

Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning,  
they have become to him altars for sinning. . . .

They love sacrifice;

they sacrifice flesh and eat it;

but the LORD has no delight in them. (Hos 8: 11, 13)

Come to Bethel, and transgress;

to Gilgal, and multiply your transgression;  
bring your sacrifices every morning,

your tithes every three days; . . .

for so you love to do, O people of Israel,

says the Lord God. (Amos 4: 4, 5)

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:

Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel,

and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba. (Amos 5: 4, 5)

I hate, I despise your feasts,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,

I will not accept them

and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5: 21-24)

But man did worship God, and fully as stringent as their strictures on the worship of false gods were the prophets' condemnation of false worship of the true God. To the passages cited above, we may add:

Thus says YHWH-Sebaoth, the God of Israel: "Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices [cf the Priestly projection of cultic demands]. But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God and you shall be my people; and walk in the way that I command you." (Jer 7: 21-23)

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the closest construction to a command to worship YHWH can be seen in the paranetic section describing the fall of Samaria in the deuteronomic 2 Kings 17: 36, "You shall fear the LORD. . . . You shall bow yourselves (from *šōhōh*) to him, and to him you shall sacrifice." There is also 1 Chron 16: 29:

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;

bring an offering and come before him!

Worship the LORD in holy array;

tremble before him all the earth.

Although virtually no English translation makes this fine distinction, the Hebrew text contains the preposition *l<sup>e</sup>*, and a more accurate translation would be "worship *before* YHWH" or "worship *toward* YHWH." The Chronicler parallels Ps 29: 2, "Worship the LORD in holy array" (RSV). English translations of the Psalms are misleading because it would appear that many of them use the proper name of YHWH as an object of the verb "worship." But translators tend to ignore the preposition *l<sup>e</sup>*. If it were translated, Ps 96: 9 would read, "Worship before YHWH in holy array," and so with the remaining references from the Psalms:

5: 7: I will worship toward thy holy temple in the fear of thee.

22: 27: . . . all the families of the nations shall worship before him [i.e., YHWH] [following LXX] or before thee [Heb].

22: 29: [Heb 28] . . . before him [lit. "before your face"] shall bow all who go down to the dust.

- 45: 11: Since he is your lord, bow to him.  
 86: 9: All the nations . . . shall come and bow before thee,  
 O Lord. . . .  
 95: 6: O come, let us worship and bow down [the parallelism makes  
 the meaning absolutely clear], let us kneel before YHWH  
 our maker.  
 97: 7: All gods bow down [worship] before him.  
 99: 5: Extol YHWH our God; worship at his footstool.  
 99: 9: Extol YHWH our God; worship at his holy mountain.  
 132: 7: Let us worship at his footstool.  
 138: 2: I bow down toward thy holy temple.

Psalm 81: 9 commands that the people shall not bow down to a foreign god.

To be sure, worshipers are commanded to bring their sacrifices to YHWH and set them before him (sometimes "before his face"; cf Lev 3: 1; 1 Kings 8: 62; Deut 12: 6-7). Yet, these acts also refer simply to a bodily action or posture. Significantly, even in those passages that condone or even command a sacrificial action, its performance at the place where YHWH's presence can be felt and his saving actions recollected is what is asked.

A striking example comes in connection with the deuteronomic directions for the celebration of the Festival of the First Fruits, an agricultural festival reinterpreted in the light of the deuteronomic Exodus theology. The worshiper was directed to take "some of the first of the fruit of the ground" to the shrine, where the priest would take the basket and "set it before the altar of YHWH your God." The one who brought the offering was then to recite the famous formula about the wandering Aramaean, whereupon he would set the gift down "before YHWH your god, and worship before YHWH your God" (Deut 26: 1-10 *et passim*). The command is literally "to set it before the face of YHWH your God and to prostrate yourself before the face of YHWH your God" (cf Is 66: 23), but even here, strictly speaking, the command is not simply: Worship YHWH. That the essential reference is to the posture of the body is confirmed in the Yahwist account of the giving of the Torah, when YHWH commanded Moses, "Come up to YHWH, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship afar off" (Ex 24: 1).

What, then, is it that YHWH desires if not worship? Included in most of the demands not to worship false gods is the prohibition against serving them as well (cf Deut 4: 19, 28; 17: 3, 28, 36; Josh 23: 7; Jer 5: 19; 11: 10; 25: 6; and others). Service is an important part of the God-man relationship, particularly when it is noted that YHWH has commanded man to serve

him (cf Deut 6: 13; 10: 12; Josh 22: 5; 1 Chron 28: 9; Ps 2: 11; and others). Is "serve" identical to "worship?" Hardly, else the two terms would appear consistently in synonymous parallelism. Instead, the commandment is not to *worship* or to *serve* other gods but to *serve* YHWH.

In this context, "serve" refers to doing the will of God, obeying him in human affairs. The demand for obedience grows out of the covenant relationship, resulting from the free choice of a free God who called his people to himself. Service has nothing to do with the ritual prostration that is worship. Instead, it refers to a life style based on three principles: justice, love, and fellowship with God.

Man is set in the world in a relationship of responsible stewardship, to till the earth, not to plunder it (Gen 2: 15), and as the sense of the free but interdependent relationship between man and God grows throughout the history of Hebrew religion, the demands laid on man are more and more those that deal with his whole life style, his relations to the world in which he has been set and to the persons with whom he must live. The act of obedience is irrelevant because man is not God's slave. The magic of sacrifice is likewise abhorrent because man cannot be God's master. In biblical—especially prophetic—thought, man is God's interpreter, responsible with him for the earth and its inhabitants.

#### WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?

Attention has focused on the Torah commandments in Deut 4 and 5, but more prominent in the liturgy of Judaism is a passage from Micah:

. . . what does the LORD require of you  
 but to do justice, and to love kindness (mercy),  
 and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6: 8)

To do, to love, to walk. These words are important and so are their objects: *justice* and *mercy*.

The primary requirement is to "do justice" (Heb *mīšpāṭ*), a total ethical demand requiring a total commitment to truth. The covenant with YHWH does not maintain itself, nor can it be influenced, by any amount of prostrations; it can be maintained only by *mīšpāṭ*. *Mīšpāṭ* is not simple obedience but a quality of genuineness and authenticity in all human relationships. Throughout the history of the covenant, the priests were charged with teaching *mīšpāṭ*. Finally, the Servant of Second Isaiah was glorified because of his ability to give himself on behalf of others and thus establish *mīšpāṭ* in the earth.

In addition to doing justice, man is commanded to love mercy (*ḥesed*). This word seems particularly at home in the prophecies of Hosea, where it



is the quality of a loving relationship between man and God. Both *hesed* and *mišpāṭ* are necessary to a genuine relationship with God, and this is what he demands. This commandment is to love mercy, not simply to love God.

Then, instead of commanding man to bow low, prostrate himself before God, Micah urges, "Walk humbly with your God." This humility has its own dignity. The life style based on justice, love, and fellowship demands that man "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream" (Amos 5: 24). To love mercy includes the demand of love: to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19: 18, cf Mk 12: 31 and parallels). A man will act with *mišpāṭ* if motivated by *hesed*. He can then walk with God, a relation which is both the source and the result of the first two of Micah's requirements. Nothing more is necessary.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Prayer of Rābi'a, a woman *ṣāfi* (Muslim mystic) in A.D. 801 (185 A.H.), quoted in A. J. Arberry, *Sufism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 4: 10 = Lk 4: 8. However, it is not written, "You shall worship . . ." as Q has stated the case, but, "You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name" (Deut 6: 13). "Worship" is substituted for "fear," and "only" is added after "him" in the Temptation Narrative.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (available as a Harper Torchbook, TB 36, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958). Schleiermacher, whose *Speeches* appeared in 1799, marked a turning point in Protestant theology, perhaps even the beginning of "modern theology."

<sup>4</sup> Henry Nelson Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958), pp. 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> Cf G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), ch. 53.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Harry M. Buck, *People of the Lord: The History, Scriptures, and Faith of Ancient Israel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 322.

<sup>9</sup> Yehezkiel Kaufmann, "The Bible and Mythological Polytheism," *JBL* LXX/3 (September, 1951), 135-48, develops a similar position.

<sup>10</sup> Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Rubenstein, "The Meaning of Torah in Contemporary Jewish Theology," *JBR*, XXXII/2 (April, 1964), 121-22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> RSV marginal trans., alt.

<sup>15</sup> Emphasis added. Cf the use made of this passage in Lk 4: 8. The additional commandment; "swear by his name," has been omitted from this quotation as its reference is again negative: not to swear by the name of an idol.