

Appendix 3: Bowing and Worshipping

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What does the Hebrew verb for “bowing/worship” mean? The root of the verb is somewhat debated, but generally it is recognized not as *shahû* (שָׁחַ) as BDB and K&B (959) have it listed, but as *havû* (חָוָה). But the usage is the important matter. It is used 170 times in the Old Testament, and almost always translated by *proskuneō* (προσκυνέω) in the Septuagint (hereafter LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament completed about A.D. 200), meaning variously according to context: bow, prostrate oneself, worship.¹ The action performed may be before humans as respect or before YHWH in prayer or worship. “Strictly speaking, therefore, the verb merely designates a gesture as part of a more inclusive action; but it comes to refer also to the inward attitude thus expressed.”² Another authority is similar: “The verb always refers to an action/attitude directed toward a human or divine figure who is recognized . . . as being in a position of honor or authority. Depending on the figure and the situation, it may be a gesture or greeting, respect, submission, or worship.”³ Let us see if these preliminary definitions can be validated from biblical usage.

The Hebrew verb is used in two primary ways: (1) in secular greetings of *respect* (Gen. 18:2; 19:1; 23:7; 24:26; 33:3, 6ff; Ex. 4:31; 11:8; 18:7 Ruth 2:10 [Ruth to Boaz], 1 Sam. 20:41 [David to Jonathan]; 28:14 [Saul to Samuel], etc.) and in (2) cultic acts of *worship* of YHWH. It is often used with *bo’*, come, (בֹּא), *zabhach*, sacrifice, (זָבַח), or *’abhadh*, serve, (עָבַד). “Especially in the Psalms or other texts related to the [ritual], the verb can not only stand for ‘pray,’ but can also be rendered ‘carry out a cultic action (before YHWH).’”⁴ (See Psalm. 5:8(7); 95:6; 99:5, 9; 132:7; 138:2; Neh. 8:6; 9:3; 1 Chron. 29:20; 2 Chron. 7:3; 20:18; 29:28-30, etc.)

In Ez. 46 during the offering of sacrifice the prince shall stand by the gate and bow in worship at its threshold (v. 2), while the people (v. 3) assist in this act of obeisance (see. v. 9).

Deut. 26:10 (see 1 Sam. 1:3, 19, 28) requires that the Israelite who offers firstfruits shall bow in worship “before YHWH your God.”

In 2 Kings 5:17ff, Naaman asked if it were permissible to bow to the false god Rimmon in Rimmon’s temple when so required by his (Naaman’s) master. Elisha gave him permission, for one can bow and not mean it: “Yet in this thing may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the temple of Rimmon *to worship* there, and he leans on my hand, and *I bow down* in the temple of Rimmon—when *I bow down* in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD please pardon your servant in this thing” (2 Kings 5:18). Here the

¹TDOT, 4:249ff.

²Ibid.

³*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:43.

⁴TDOT, 4:252.

NKJV variously translates the same word *worship* (once) and *bow down* (twice), capturing the sense of the original. Naaman was only bowing, but his master was worshipping. This demonstrates that sometimes the word can mean to mechanically bow without the attendant idea of worship.

Moreover, it is instructive how often “bow/worship” *havâ* (חָוָה) and “serve” *ʿābad* (עָבַד) go together, as here in Exodus 20. “Serve” occurs before “bow/worship” in Deut. 8:19; 11:16; 17:3; 29:25 (26), Joshua 23:7, 16; Judges 2:19; 1 Kings 9:6, 9; 2 Kings 21:21; Jer. 8:2; 13:10; 16:11; 25:6; 2 Chron. 7:19, 22. “Bow/worship” occurs before “serve” in Deut. 4:19; 5:9; 30:17; Ex. 20:5; 23:24; 2 Kings 17:35; 21:3; 2 Chron. 7:22; 33:3; Jer. 22:9.⁵ Thus we conclude that the verb *havâ* (חָוָה), especially as used in worship, does not simply mean bow but usually carries the additional idea of serving the object of “bowing/worship.”

Exodus 32:8 (see especially Psalm. 106:19) instructs us that worshipping the molded calf was wrong. This was more than just bowing and more than respect; it was worship, as is seen by the explanation in the verse itself: “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

In the LXX, Ex. 20:5 is translated: οὐ προσκυνήσεις αὐτοῖς, οὐ δὲ μὴ λατρεύσεις αὐτοῖς (“You shall not *worship* them and neither shall you *serve* them”). We see here a distinction between the two words for “worship,” which distinction the early fathers maintained. The first word *proskunêseis* (προσκυνήσεις) can mean, like the Hebrew it usually translates *havâ* (חָוָה), polite bowing or worshipping. Obviously here it means worship. The second word *latreuseis* (λατρεύσεις) only means to serve God in the sense of cultic or ritual worship. Thus the LXX translators were saying that we should not worship idols and should not serve them in a cultic sense. But nothing is forbidden in bowing to a symbol in worship.

In the New Testament, *proskuneō* (προσκυνεῶ) is almost always used of worshipping God only,⁶ though in the LXX such was not the case. The Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicea (787) distinguished between the two words, allowing *proskuneō* (προσκυνεῶ) of icons, but reserving *latreia* (λατρεία) of God only.⁷

Sometimes the Hebrew verb *havâ* (חָוָה) can be used of both YHWH and the king at the same time: “Then David said to all the assembly, ‘Now bless the LORD your God.’ So all the assembly blessed the LORD God of their fathers, and *bowed their heads* and prostrated themselves before the LORD *and the king*” (1 Chron. 29:20). It would seem obvious from the analogy of Scripture that they worshipped God but bowed before both, which is precisely what we do in worship; namely, we bow in the presence of a symbol (the cross), but we worship God only. Here the king was the symbol of God’s authority and presence, and so they bowed to both but worshipped only the Lord.

The Hebrew word for bow *qadad* (קָדַד) is not the same as the word for worship *havâ* (חָוָה). *Qadad* means “I bow down,” and according to TWOT

The root refers to the bowing of one’s head accompanying and emphasizing obeisance.

Hence, it has a very restricted use, unlike its Akkadian cognate *qadādu*. It is to be

⁵Ibid., 4:254.

⁶As a quick look at a concordance will reveal. See also TDNT, 6:764.

⁷TDNT, 6:765; also *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, “The Seven Ecumenical Councils,” vol. 14, p.

distinguished from all other words for “bow” by this restricted use. Our root occurs fifteen times (perhaps sixteen; cf. *qādar*). This root is used to emphasize devotion and thus occurs at especially crucial times. When Joseph’s brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin, their obeisance is notably and understandably pronounced (Gen 43:28). Similarly, when Saul sees the vision of Samuel he is especially respectful (1 Sam 28:14). The deepest awe and reverence typifies one’s attitude toward God at crucial times, for example, when Eliezer’s prayer is miraculously answered (Gen 24:26), and when the people celebrated at Hezekiah’s consecration of the temple (2 Chr 29:30). Israel reacted in this way when they saw Aaron’s signs (Exo 4:31) validating the announcement that God had sent Moses to deliver them from Egypt, and when the Passover was initiated (Exo 12:27). God’s giving the law a second time in spite of Moses’ anger (sin) in the face of Israel’s idolatry elicited this deep reaction from Moses. Each recorded dedication of the temple was met with this deepest worship (1 Chr 29:20; 2 Chr 29:30; Neh 8:6).⁸

Notice these occurrences of *qadad* (to bow, in italics below) used with the Hebrew *havâ* (to worship, underlined below). Besides 1 Chron. 29:20 given above:

Then the man *bowed down his head* and worshipped the LORD (Gen. 24:26).

And *I bowed my head* and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham, who had led me in the way of truth to take the daughter of my master’s brother for his son (Gen. 24:48).

And they [Joseph’s brothers] answered, “Your servant our father is in good health; he is still alive.” And *they bowed their heads down* and prostrated themselves (Gen. 43:28).

So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction, then *they bowed their heads* and worshipped (Ex. 4:31).

It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households. So the *people bowed their heads* and worshipped (Ex. 12:27).

So Moses made haste and *bowed his head* toward the earth, and worshipped (Ex. 34:8).

Then the LORD opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and *he bowed his head* and fell flat on his face (Num. 22:31).

David also arose afterward, went out of the cave, and called out to Saul, saying, “My lord the king!” And when Saul looked behind him, David *stooped* with his face to the earth, and bowed down (1 Sam. 24:8 (Heb = v. 9)).

And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he *stooped with his face* to the ground and bowed down (1 Sam. 28:14).

And Bathsheba *bowed* and did homage to the king. Then the king said, “What is your wish?” (1 Kings 1:16; v. 31 is the same).

⁸ TWOT on *qadad*.

And Jehoshaphat *bowed his head* with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem bowed [this verb means fell] before the LORD, worshipping the LORD (2 Chron. 20:18).

Moreover King Hezekiah and the leaders commanded the Levites to sing praise to the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with gladness, and *they bowed their heads* and worshipped (2 Chron. 29:30).

And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And *they bowed their heads* and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground (Neh. 8:6).

We should conclude: (1) "bowing" often goes with worship. (2) The Hebrew word for worship does not necessarily include bowing, for if it did we would not need the added word *bow*. (3) Sometimes the people bowed in the presence of symbols to worship the Lord. Therefore, when the Second Commandment says not to "bow down" or "serve" (our two words) carved images/idols, we notice that "bow down" means "worship," which is supported by the verb "serve." From the above verses quoted throughout the Old Testament, we see that we are not to worship or become devoted to the creation, but only to the Creator, but also we see that we can mechanically bow, which does not involve worship.

We see that Scripture itself calls for a distinction between respecting a king and worshipping Yahweh, even though the same word can be used for both. It would seem difficult to improve on the answer of an early bishop to the Jews about alleged idolatry among Christians:

The bishop Leontius of Neapolis in Cyprus, who at the close of the sixth century wrote an apology for Christianity against the Jews, and in it noticed the charge of idolatry, asserts that the law of Moses is directed not unconditionally against the use of religious images, but only against the idolatrous worship of them; since the tabernacle and the temple themselves contained cherubim and other figures. . . .⁹

So what does the verb *havâ* mean here in Exodus 20:5? Keil and Delitzsch note:

It is not only evident from the context that the allusion is not to the making of images generally, but to the construction of figures of God as objects of religious reverence or worship, but this is expressly stated in v. 5; so that even *Calvin* observes, that "there is no necessity to refute what some have foolishly imagined, that sculpture and painting of every kind are condemned here."

K & D go on to translate v. 5: "Thou shalt not pray to them and serve them," stating that the verb *havâ* (חווה) "signifies bending before God in prayer, and invoking His name" and 'ābad (עבד) "worship by means of sacrifice and religious ceremonies."¹⁰

In light of the tabernacle, temple, and other passages mentioned above, we conclude that what is forbidden here is not using symbols, nor even bowing in their presence, but terminating one's worship on them.

⁹*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, "The Seven Ecumenical Councils," vol. 14, p. 568.

¹⁰Keil and Delitzsch, (AP&A), 1:465. This set is numbered differently from most sets of K&D.

One excellent example of this distinction is the bronze serpent. Moses had obeyed God's instruction to put a serpent on a bronze pole so that if the people looked to it they would be healed from the snake bites they were being judged with (Num. 21:8-9). This symbolized God's mercy, and those who did not look to it in faith were not healed! It was a required symbol. It was not good enough just to think about it. But when the serpent on the pole became an object of worship rather than a symbol, it was rightly destroyed by Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:1-4).

Jesus said that the serpent on the pole was a type of His death (John 3:14-15) and that everyone who looked to Him on the cross would be saved! We may use it in worship, and like the serpent look at it in the worship service, even reverence it, as long as it is a symbol, but no one is allowed to worship it. We are not required to bow to the cross in worship, but one is required to approach God by means of the original cross of Christ and by no other way. Thus there is nothing wrong with having a physical cross, with honoring it as the visible expression of what Jesus has done for us on a real cross 2,000 years ago. If we can have the mental image of it, we can legitimately have the physical expression of it. But as soon as one worships the cross or gives magical power to it, he has crossed the line.

As Paul states, we are not allowed to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). Israel was not allowed to worship idols (Lev. 26:1) nor to make carved images for private worship (Deut. 27:15). **AMEN.**