***Worship***

The Greek verb typically translated worship is *proskuneō* (#4352 προσκυνέω; pronounced prōs-cue-'nay-ō, a compound word built from the preposition pros, “to, toward,” and the verb *kuneō*, κυνέω, ‘to kiss’). This phrase is usually translated “worship him,” and the reason for translating it “pay homage to him” is detailed below. The BDAG Greek-English lexicon has this to say about the verb *proskuneō*:

It is “frequently used to designate the custom of prostrating oneself before a person or persons and kissing their feet or the hem of their garment, the ground, etc.; the Persians did this in the presence of their deified king, and the Greeks before a divinity or something holy. It is to express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to an authority figure, (fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully.”[[1]](#footnote-20550)

The act of prostrating oneself, or at least bowing low, is very ancient and goes all the way back to Genesis. In the Old Testament, the act of prostration or bowing low is often described by the word *shachah* (#07812 שָׁחָה), which is often translated by the Greek word *proskuneō* in the Septuagint. Examples of people “bowing down” (“worshiping”) to other people are numerous (e.g. Gen. 23:7, 12; 27:29; 33:3, 6, 7; 37:7; 43:26; Exod. 11:8; 1 Sam. 20:41; 24:8; 25:23; 28:14; 2 Sam. 1:2; 2 Sam. 9:6, 8; 2 Sam. 14:4, 22, 33; 18:21). All those examples, and many more, use the word *shachah*,[[2]](#footnote-28359) which means to bow down, and is used of bowing before God in worship or bowing before people.

Jesus understood the custom of falling prostrate before rulers, men of God, and other great people (cf. 1 Sam. 25:24; 2 Kings 4:37; 1 Chron. 29:20; Esther 8:3; Matt. 18:29; Mark 5:22; 7:25; Luke 5:12; 17:16; John 11:32; Acts 10:25; Rev. 1:17; 19:10; 22:8), and he accepted that public display of homage and respect when people fell before him (cf. Mark 5:22; 7:25, Luke 5:12; etc.).

The problem with always translating *proskuneō* as “worship” is due to the fact that the act and meaning of “worship” have changed through the ages. In the Eastern world in general, falling prostrate was an accepted and expected act of honor, respect, and worship. Among the Greeks, as noted above, prostration was much more limited, but was done before gods and things considered holy. Among the Romans, prostration was even more limited than that, but still could occur.

As we can see from the Bible, the words *shachah* and *proskune*ō were both used to represent a physical act, the act of kneeling on the ground before someone and placing the forehead on the ground, or falling full length on the ground before someone, or at least bowing low before someone (the Latin and Latin Vulgate would use adoro (cf. “adore”) and *veneror* (cf. “venerate”) to represent that act). Prostration or kneeling then touching the forehead to the ground was an act of respect and honor, and was supposed to represent an attitude of the heart, but often it was just done because otherwise, the ruler would be offended and angry, just as Haman was angry when Mordecai would not get down on his knees and bow before him (Esther 3:5). Many people who “worshiped” God (by bowing before Him) ignored or defied His commandments (cf. 1 Kings 1:53; 2 Kings 5:18; Esther 3:2, 5; Jer. 7:2; 26:2). Many others who “worshiped” loved Him and gladly obeyed His commandments. But both sets of people were said to “worship God” because they bowed down before Him. It is similar to the modern act of everyone in a room standing up when the President of the United States walks in. It is an expected action, but does not necessarily reflect the heart.

In 1611, when the KJV was written, the English word “worship” was used for the worship of deity, but it was still also used of bowing down before men of higher rank, which was an expected act of respect and deference at that time. Kings and nobles expected people to bow before them. Thus, it was expected at the time of Jesus and in the 1600s as well, that someone would prostrate themselves or bow down before a superior, especially someone such as a king. It should be noted that kneeling and touching the forehead to the ground is still seen among Muslims when they pray, prostrating themselves before Allah.

The act of bowing before a king or dignitary then led to some rulers being designated as “Your Worship,” taking the act of worship they received and making it into a title. Because the act of bowing to rulers was still common in 1611, translating *proskuneō* as “worship” worked very well and was not confusing to the average reader, who still connected “worship” with a physical act of some kind (this also fits with the liturgy of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church, which considers “worship” to be a form of prescribed action, not “just” a subjective act of the heart). However, in the four centuries since the King James Version, the meaning of “worship” has changed. For one thing, we stopped bowing and prostrating ourselves (worshiping) before those of higher rank.

In fact, the idea of “worship” as deeply bowing or falling in prostration before a person of higher status has completely left modern English vocabulary (as per Merriam-Webster’s 11th edition Collegiate Dictionary). Also, today people think of “worship” as an attitude of the heart that can be accompanied by a physical action, but does not have to be. Today “worship,” in many cultures, is basically a mental act, so much so that if someone does something without “meaning it,” it would not be called “worship.” Yet James Jordan points out, “Ancient man bowed before his god, whether it was Nature (Baalism) or the creator (YHWH). Modern man does not bow before his god, whether Nature (humanism) or the Creator (Christ). Similarly, for ancient man, the heart of religious exercise was adoration, worship, prostration, sacrament (a fellowship meal with the god). This was true of Israel before the Lord, and of the Canaanites before Baal. And this is the biblical view of worship: Preaching/proclamation is the word from God, which leads to a response of adoration, prostration, sacrament. The modern Christian, however, sees the heart of worship as entertainment (from a choir and an entertaining preacher) or as philosophical meditation (from a scholarly preacher). The sermon, instead of leading into worship, has become itself the climax of worship. And, just as the modern Christian view of worship is not much more than studying doctrine…we don’t see Christians bowing down to the Lord either, but we do see them studying Him, preaching about Him, and writing books about Him. Thus, there is indeed a big difference between ancient religions and modern ones. Ancient man *primarily* worshiped his gods, while modern man *primarily* studies his. This is true both of pagans and of conservative, orthodox Christians.”[[3]](#footnote-29462)

Another significant change in our modern Western understanding of worship is that today most people only use the word “worship” when speaking of God, never people, with the exception of those few instances when we use it in a hyperbolic and idiomatic sense, such as “He worships that new car,” or, “She worships the ground he walks on.” Even in those cases, however, “worship” is used as a term of extravagant respect that occurs in the heart, not something that is necessarily connected to a specific action. The shift in meaning of “worship” causes problems for translators, because if we talk about biblical people “worshiping” Jesus, people reading the Bible can be confused as to exactly what that worship entailed, and think it means Jesus is God.

Biblically, this act of prostration was done many times to humans in high positions, which proves that being “worshiped” does not turn Jesus into God, and it also proves that this modern meaning of worship only being used in reference to God should not be imported into the ancient uses of the term *proskuneō*.

For example:

* Joseph’s brothers “worshiped” him (Gen. 43:26).
* Joshua fell down and “worshiped” an angel (Joshua 5:14).
* Ruth “worshiped” Boaz (Ruth 2:10).
* David “worshiped” Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:41).
* Abigail “worshiped” David (1 Sam. 25:41).
* The leaders of Israel “worshiped” God and the king (1 Chron. 29:20).
* The servant in the parable “worshiped” (fell on his knees) his master (Matt. 18:26).

Thus, while it was appropriate to translate *proskuneō* as “worship” in 1611, if we translate *proskuneō* as “worship” today, it often makes a verse take on a meaning that is not in the biblical text at all. For example, in Matthew 2:2, the magi did not think of the infant Jesus as God, and did not “worship” him as they would a deity. Rather, they paid homage to him as they would have to another king, understanding, of course, that they realized he was a very special king. Also, it is worth emphasizing that Matthew 2:2 specifies that the magi thought Jesus was a king, they did not think he was God.

The meaning of “worship” has shifted from being represented by a physical act to being a mental act, but that does not mean that *proskuneō* should never be translated “worship.” For example, the Devil asked Jesus to fall down and “worship” him (Matt. 4:9). The Devil wanted Jesus to prostrate himself before him with the same adoration Jesus would have had for God, and therefore it seems the best way to portray that is to translate *proskuneō* as “worship.” The Devil wanted Jesus’ full devotion, not just the act of falling prostrate. A good rule of thumb is that *shachah/proskuneō* is translated “bow,” “bow down,” or something similar if the person is showing respect to a person, and “worship” if one is showing respect to God, a god, or gods. Although translating *shachah/proskuneō* one way when humans are involved and another way when God is involved may be an acceptable translation practice, the difficulty is that it usually gives the English reader the wrong impression that only God was “worshiped.”

The homage and “worship” that the magi paid to Jesus Christ is still appropriate for us today, although we would not tend to express our homage the same way. The honor we pay to Jesus also fits with Hebrews 1:6, which says that when the Son came into the world God said, “And let all the angels of God worship Him” (Heb. 1:6 NASB). Hebrews 1:4-7 is about angels, but God wants people to worship the Son too. We can see this because Philippians 2:10-11 tells of a time when “every” tongue will confess and every knee will bow (i.e., in worship or as an act of submission) to Jesus, willingly or unwillingly. The honor we pay to Christ fits the “worship” he accepted when he walked the earth. Our “worship” to Jesus Christ is not the same worship we give to God, but it is worship as the Lord (Phil. 2:11), the King (Matt. 28:18).

A proper understanding of *proskuneō* helps enlighten certain biblical passages. For example, Psalm 2:12 is to be understood as a part of the act of worship. It says:

“Kiss the Son lest he be angry, and you perish on the road, for his wrath will suddenly be kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.”

The Psalmist is saying that the person who prostrates himself before the Son (the future Messiah) in respect and homage, including kissing the feet or robe, will be blessed, while those who refuse to honor the Son will be destroyed in their selfishness and rebellion.

In conclusion, *proskuneō* properly means “kiss toward” and the ancient act of worship often involved actually kissing the ground, or feet of the one being honored, or the hem of his garment. It is an act of honor and reverence and submission to the one receiving *proskuneō/shachah,* and it was performed towards people, angels, false gods, and the True God.

A good case could be made for the value of physically bowing down before God. Done with the right heart, it demonstrates humility to one greater than oneself, which should lead to obedience. Many modern Christians walk out of a sermon with no intention of changing what they do or how they live. For them, going to church is an intellectual exercise only. Of course, prostrating oneself before God could become just one more physical activity, but one wonders if it could help people stay focused on who was superior to whom.

1. *BDAG*, p. 882. [↑](#footnote-ref-20550)
2. There is some debate as to whether *shachah* is the root or whether perhaps חוה is the root verb. *HALOT* chooses חוה and the Brown, Driver, and Briggs (BDB) Lexicon chooses שָׁחָה (*shachah*). See *BDB*, p. 1005, and *HALOT*, p. 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-28359)
3. James Jordan, *Judges: God’s War Against Humanism*, 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-29462)