

**Προσκυνέω  
Does Not  
Mean  
“Worship”**

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ΠΡΟΣΚΥΝΕΩ DOES NOT MEAN “WORSHIP”

A PAPER

FOR THE 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
OF THE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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NOVEMBER 16, 2023

## Προσκυνέω Does Not Mean “Worship”

In the 1987 cult classic movie “The Princess Bride,” the scheming Sicilian Vizzini repeatedly says, “Inconceivable!” Swordsman Inigo Montoya furrows his brow and replies, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” I have the same concern about the word ‘worship’ and its primary Greek counterpart προσκυνέω.<sup>1</sup> Today, the term ‘worship’ pervades Christian culture and is often used in reference to church assemblies (“go to worship”) and especially to church music (“worship music,” “worship team,” “worship pastor,” etc.). Since “worship” is the common translation of the Greek προσκυνέω, I have come to question whether προσκυνέω means what we think it means.

This paper arises from my PhD dissertation,<sup>2</sup> which closely investigated the 204 times προσκυνέω appears in the Septuagint and the 61 times it appears in the NT. I conclude that προσκυνέω does not mean “worship.” Rather, the term is much better understood as a reference to the ancient middle-Eastern custom of prostrating oneself before deity or a person of higher status. This demonstrative act was done to display submission and sometimes allegiance, whether to a person or a deity. As such,

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<sup>1</sup> The English word ‘worship’ appears seventy times in the NASB New Testament (2020), and in 76 percent of these occurrences, προσκυνέω is the Greek word behind the English term ‘worship’. These seventy occurrences include both nouns and verbs, such as “worship,” “worshiped,” “worshiping,” or “worshiper.” In the NASB, προσκυνέω is the Greek word in fifty-three of its seventy references to “worship.” Further, of the sixty-one times that προσκυνέω appears in the NT, the NASB translates it as “worship” 87 percent of the time. Others: KJV = 100 %; ASV (1901) = 100%; RSV (1946) = 87%; NIV (1973) = 84%; NRSV (1990) = 85%; ESV = 85%; NAB (1970) = 62%; NEB (1961) = 61%.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wadsworth, *A Worship Service or an Assembly: An Investigation of the Terminology Used To Describe Church Meetings in the New Testament* (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022).

προσκυνέω refers to a specific bodily gesture (prostration); it does not refer to a feeling or emotion, as the English word ‘worship’ often does today. It is also not a general term for “ritual activity” in a sacred place. Further, even though the modern English mind commonly associates “worship” with Christian assembly activity, προσκυνέω is never used in the NT to describe a Christian assembly, to identify the purpose of a Christian assembly, or to refer to any typical activity of that assembly. These conclusions (about the definition and connotations of προσκυνέω) may run against the grain of modern thought, but the evidence for these ideas is overwhelming.

Part of the confusion about our English concept of “worship” arises from the fact that so many Greek words are translated as “worship,” such as προσκυνέω, λατρεύω, λειτουργέω, σέβομαι, and θρησκεία. As a close analysis reveals, these five words are not synonymous, and they are not related etymologically. Each of these words connotes a different aspect of activities performed for deity, but I would argue that none of them should be translated as “worship.” This paper, however, will focus on the word προσκυνέω, the primary Greek word for “worship.”

### Προσκυνέω in the LXX

When NT writers used the term προσκυνέω in the first century, the word was already a commonly used term in the writers’ Jewish culture. In the Septuagint, προσκυνέω appears 204 times in its various forms. Since the Septuagint was “the Bible of the early church and of Judaism until the late first century A.D.,” the extensive use of προσκυνέω

in the LXX provides us with abundant evidence to indicate how the NT writers and first-century Jews were likely to understand the term.<sup>3</sup>

The Hebrew word *הוה* provides helpful background for determining the meaning of *προσκυνέω*. The Septuagint translators used the Greek word *προσκυνέω* to translate every occurrence of the Hebrew word *הוה*.<sup>4</sup> Of the 170 times that *הוה* is found in the OT, the LXX translates it as *προσκυνέω* 165 times. In the five times that *הוה* is not translated with *προσκυνέω*, it appears that the LXX was using a Hebrew text that lacked *הוה*.<sup>5</sup> The important point is that the Septuagint translators identified *προσκυνέω* as the proper word to use every time they translated *הוה*.

So, what does *הוה* mean? Its usage throughout the OT confirms that it means to “prostrate oneself.” The Brown Driver Briggs (BDB) Hebrew lexicon is correct when it says that the sole meaning of *הוה* is to “bow down, prostrate oneself.” BDB rightly adds that the action is performed in three settings: before a monarch or superior, before God, and before other gods.<sup>6</sup> BDB also rightly avoids saying that “worship” is one of the

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Porter, “Septuagint/Greek Old Testament,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background (DNTB)*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1099.

<sup>4</sup> Historically, *הִשְׁתַּחֲוּתָהּ* was assumed to emerge from the root of *שחח*. This is syntactically difficult since the hithpalel for *שחח* should not be *הִשְׁתַּחֲוּתָהּ*. With the discovery of a certain Ugaritic verb, scholars now commonly see the root as *הוה*, which has the same meaning as *שחח*. See H. D. Preuss, “*הוה*, etc.” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 4:249; and Edwin Yamauchi, “*הוה*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:267.

<sup>5</sup> The five times when *הוה* is left untranslated in the LXX are Josh 5:14; 1 Sam 1:28; 1 Kgs 11:33; Isa 36:7; Jer 7:2. In Isa 60:14, *הוה* is translated as *προσκυνέω*, but it appears only in a variant reading of the LXX.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, “*שחח*,” *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 1005. See also

possible meanings of חוה. Matthew Bowen’s 2013 study of חוה and προσκυνέω concludes that “the concrete act of proskynesis is always denoted” in the 170 times when חוה is found in the OT.<sup>7</sup> The term ‘proskynesis,’ not found in standard English dictionaries, is the transliterated term that scholars often give to the physical gesture of prostration depicted by προσκυνέω.<sup>8</sup> Since προσκυνέω is the only word that the Septuagint translators used to translate חוה, it is reasonable to conclude that they understood that the meaning of προσκυνέω was also to prostrate oneself.<sup>9</sup>

The act of religious prostration, prominently addressed in the Decalogue, was such a focal point of Israelite behavior that the rabbis reflected on the proper way to perform the gesture:

Prostrating, how is it done? After he raises his head from bowing the fifth bow, he sits on the ground and falls upon his face to the ground . . . . The bowing referred to everywhere is upon the knees. The Qeda bow is upon the nose. Prostration is done

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Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, “שחיה,” *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), 959; William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 97; Yamauchi, “חוה,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:268.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew L. Bowen, “‘They Came and Held Him by the Feet and Worshipped Him’: Proskynesis Before Jesus in its Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (2013): 69. Bowen’s analysis does not include the OT apocrypha.

<sup>8</sup> See Alexander P. Kazhdan, ed., “Proskynesis,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3:1738–39. Describing the act through 1,100 years of Byzantine culture (ca. AD 300 – 1400), the *ODB* says, “The physical act ranged from full prostration to a genuflection, a bow, or a simple greeting and concretized the relative positions of performer and beneficiary within a hierarchical order.” See also Takuji Abe, “Proskynēsis: From a Persian Court Protocol to a Greek Religious Practice,” *Tekmeria* 14 (2018): 2. Lozano provides many examples of the gesture in Greco-Roman literature, in Ray M. Lozano, *The Proskynesis of Jesus in the New Testament: A Study on the Significance of Jesus as an Object of “Proskuneo” in the New Testament Writings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2020), 13–20.

<sup>9</sup> Bowen identifies the broad awareness of prostration in ancient Egypt, in the daily temple liturgy of Karnak, in Akkadian literature, in the Gilgamesh Epic, in the El-Amarna letters, and in Sumerian literature where the act is described as “scraping the earth (with one’s nose).” See Bowen, “Proskynesis Before Jesus,” 66–68.

with the hands and legs/feet stretched out until you find yourself placed upon the ground.”<sup>10</sup>

This statement was likely recorded around AD 1200. But similar statements can be found as early as AD 200: “Hishtaḥava’a,<sup>11</sup> this is prostrating oneself while spreading one’s arms and legs in total submission.”<sup>12</sup> The exact details of the gesture of προσκυνέω likely varied in different cultures and times.<sup>13</sup> But typical act of prostration in Scripture places the prostrating person on the knees with face to the ground.

#### The Directional Component of Προσκυνέω

The term προσκυνέω has an inherent directional component indicating that the act is directed “to” or “toward” the person or deity being honored, a component that is consistent with proskynesis. The English word ‘worship’ does not contain a directional component. The directional element of προσκυνέω is accomplished by two factors. First, the word’s prefix—the preposition πρός—commonly carries the idea of “to” or “toward.”<sup>14</sup> The prefix προσ- is frequently found in many compound words in the NT. As

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<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, *Mishneh Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing* 5:13 (ca. AD 1200).

<sup>11</sup> The root of הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה is חוה. See footnote 4.

<sup>12</sup> Mishnah *Shevuot* 16b:9 (ca. AD 190 – 230). See also Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah, Mishnah *Chizkuni* Exodus 23:24:1, Mishnah *Chizkuni* Exodus 20:5:1 (13th century), and Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, Mishnah *Tur HaAroch*, Exodus 20:5:1 (ca. AD 1269 – 1343).

<sup>13</sup> See the analysis of ancient texts in Abe, “Proskynēsis,” 1–45.

<sup>14</sup> This statement may appear to be an example of a root fallacy, but as Carson acknowledges, “The meaning of a word *may* reflect the meanings of its component parts,” (emphasis original) in D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 32. See also Murray Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 189; Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, “πρός,” *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1496–99; Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich (BDAG), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 873–75.

Harris notes, “Most of the 64 NT compounds involving πρὸς express some sense of direction.”<sup>15</sup> Second, προσκυνέω commonly takes the dative case,<sup>16</sup> which frequently connotes “to” or “toward.”<sup>17</sup> The word προσκυνέω thus encompasses the idea that prostration is performed in front of its intended recipient, with the prostrator’s body pointing “toward” the receiver of the action.<sup>18</sup>

It has often been stated that προσκυνέω literally means “to kiss toward,” noting that the προσ- prefix means “toward” and that the κυνέω stem means “to kiss.”<sup>19</sup> But this notion has several problems. Chris Jack (2010) says that it is a “prevailing myth that *proskuneo* has something to do with ‘kissing’.”<sup>20</sup> Jack admits that there is a possible ancient etymological connection between προσκυνέω and “kiss toward.” However, he

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<sup>15</sup> Harris, *Prepositions and Theology*, 197. He cites the examples of προστρέχω (run up to), προσεύχομαι (pray to), προσλαλέω (speak to), προσκαρτερέω (hold fast to, be devoted to).

<sup>16</sup> In the Hebrew text, ל commonly follows הוה, indicating that the action of הוה is performed “to” or “toward” the honored one. In these 153 cases, the LXX translates הוה with προσκυνέω followed by a dative indirect object 143 times.

<sup>17</sup> See Andreas J. Köstenberger, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer (KMP), *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 122–23; F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 100.

<sup>18</sup> See Ezek 8:16–18. The “greatest abomination” was when twenty-five men entered the temple and prostrated with their backs to the temple and their faces toward the sun.

<sup>19</sup> For example, see BDAG, “προσκυνέω,” *Greek-English Lexicon*, 882; Moisés Silva, ed., “προσκυνέω,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDNTTE)*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4:150; and Horst’s examination of kissing in ancient Greek, Oriental, and Jewish religious practice in Johannes Horst, *Proskynein: Zur Anbetung im Urchristentum nach ihrer religionsgeschichtlichen Eigenart* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1932), 44–66.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Jack, “The *Proskuneo* Myth: When a Kiss Is Not a Kiss,” in *In Praise of Worship: An Exploration of Text and Practice*, eds. David J. Cohen and Michael Parsons (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 84–97. Jack’s conclusions essentially concur with that of Marti, who refers to earlier conclusions by Bolkestein and by Nock, in Berthe M. Marti, “Proskynesis and Adorare,” *Language* 12:4 (1936): 272–82.



says, the notion that the “root meaning” of προσκυνέω is “to kiss toward” is an example of a root fallacy as identified by James Barr in 1961.<sup>21</sup> Jack rightly notes that none of the examples of προσκυνέω in the NT or the LXX refers “either explicitly or implicitly” to kissing.<sup>22</sup> He further says that “there is nothing in the etymology or early usage of κρη that as much as hints at kissing.”<sup>23</sup> In the *TDNT*, Greeven, too, expresses doubts about the idea that kissing is part of προσκυνέω.<sup>24</sup> Both Jack and Greeven repeatedly point to the idea that προσκυνέω refers to the gesture of prostration.<sup>25</sup>

### Prostration Indicators

To determine the meaning of any word, primary attention must be given to the context in which the word appears. As Constantine Campbell says, “The context ... virtually makes meaning.”<sup>26</sup> In the case of προσκυνέω, the contexts of sixty-three verses in the OT and OT apocrypha and fifteen verses in the NT make it clear that the action of κρη (or

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<sup>21</sup> Jack, “The *Proskuneo* Myth,” 89.

<sup>22</sup> Jack, “The *Proskuneo* Myth,” 92.

<sup>23</sup> Jack, “The *Proskuneo* Myth,” 93.

<sup>24</sup> Heinrich Greeven, “προσκυνέω, προσκυνητής,” *TDNT*, Gerhard Friedrich, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:759.

<sup>25</sup> Jack, “The *Proskuneo* Myth,” 91–93; Greeven, “προσκυνέω,” *TDNT*, 6:764. Greeven has greater confidence that προσκυνέω refers to prostration in the LXX, but in the NT, he says that prostration may take a lesser role in the word’s meaning.

<sup>26</sup> Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 75, 89. The primary importance of context has been emphasized by many others. See James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press), 38; Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1989), 178–81; Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 138; Darrell L. Bock, “Lexical Analysis: Studies in Words,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 137–38.

προσκυνέω in the LXX and NT) is prostration on the ground.<sup>27</sup> Prostration is clear in these verses because the context adds a range of explanatory terms that strongly indicate that προσκυνέω indeed connotes proskynesis. Two of these contextual ‘prostration indicators’ are falling down (πίπτω)<sup>28</sup> and stooping/kneeling (κύπτω),<sup>29</sup> which denote actions that would commonly occur prior to assuming a position of prostration. One must first fall or kneel prior to prostrating.

For example, Ruth falls on her face and prostrates before Boaz (Ru 2:10). When approaching King David, Abigail falls and prostrates (1 Sm 25:23), Mephibosheth falls and prostrates (2 Sam 9:6), as does Joab and Absalom (2 Sam 14:22, 33). Judith falls and prostrates before Holofernes (Jdt 10:23), and Achior falls and prostrates before Judith (Jdt 14:7). In the NT, the wise men fall and prostrate before the baby Jesus (Mt 2:11), Cornelius falls down and prostrates before Peter (Acts 10:25), and John falls and prostrates to the angel in Revelation (Rev 19:10; 22:8).

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<sup>27</sup> More than 100 other verses also support the idea that πηπ (or προσκυνέω) equals prostration, but the context is not as obvious as in these sixty-three verses.

<sup>28</sup> Πίπτω or προσπίπτω accompanies προσκυνέω in the LXX in Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam 20:41; 25:23; 2 Sam 1:2; 9:6; 14:4, 22, 33; 2 Kgs 4:37; 2 Chr 7:3; 20:18; 29:28; Job 1:20; Ps 21:30; Ps 94:6; Dan 2:46; 3:5, 6, 10, 11, 15; and in the NT in Matt 2:11; 4:9; 18:26; Acts 10:25; 1 Cor 14:25; Rev 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4, 10; 22:8.

<sup>29</sup> Stooping (κύπτω) appears with προσκυνέω in the LXX in Gen 43:28; Exod 4:31; 12:27; 34:8; Num 22:31; 1 Sam 24:9; 1 Sam 28:14; 1 Kgs 1:16, 31; 2 Chr 20:18; Isa 46:6; 2 Esd 18:6. Similarly, προσκυνέω is accompanied with κάμπτω “bending the knee” in 1 Chr 29:20 and 2 Chr 29:29, or ὀκλάζω “kneeling” in 1 Kgs 19:18.

Four other prostration indicators depict the person being “on the ground” (ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν),<sup>30</sup> “on their face” (πρόσωπον),<sup>31</sup> on their “knees” (γόνατα),<sup>32</sup> or “at the feet” (ποδοί)<sup>33</sup> of the honored one when proskynesis takes place. These four indicators, also found dozens of times with προσκυνέω in the LXX and NT, identify the humbled position of the person who performs proskynesis. For example, when the two angels come to Sodom, Lot prostrates himself with his face to the earth (Gen 19:1). When Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt, they prostrate themselves before Joseph with their faces to the ground (Gen 42:6). Then, when Jacob comes to Egypt, Joseph prostrates himself with his face to the earth (Gen 48:12). After Ezra reads the Book of the Law, the people stoop down and prostrate to the Lord with their faces to the ground (2 Esd 18:6; cf. Neh 8:6). After Elisha heals the son of the Shunammite woman, she falls at Elisha’s feet, prostrating on the ground (2 Kgs 4:37). After the resurrected Jesus greets the women who had come to his tomb, they take hold of his feet and prostrate to him (Matt 28:9).

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<sup>30</sup> “Upon the ground” (ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν) is found twenty-nine times with προσκυνέω in the LXX (Gen 18:2; 19:1; 24:52; 33:3; 37:10; 42:6; 43:26; 48:12; Exod 34:8; Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam 24:9; 25:23, 41; 28:14; 2 Sam 1:2; 14:4, 22, 33; 18:28; 24:20; 1 Kgs 1:23, 31; 2 Kgs 2:15; 4:37; 1 Chr 21:21; 2 Chr 7:3; 2 Esd 18:6 (Neh 8:6); Ps 21:30; Isa 49:23). A similar phrase is “on the pavement” (ἐπὶ τὸ λιθόστρωτον) in 2 Chr 7:3 or “on the ground” (χαμαί) in Dan 2:46; Job 1:20.

<sup>31</sup> Προσκυνέω on the face (πρόσωπον) is found in the LXX in Gen 19:1; 42:6; 43:26; 48:12; Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam 20:41; 24:9; 25:23, 41; 28:14; 2 Sam 9:6; 14:4, 22, 33; 18:28; 24:20; 1 Kgs 1:31; 2 Chr 7:3; 2 Chr 20:18; 2 Esd 18:6 (Neh 8:6); Dan 2:46; 1 Cor 14:25; Rev 7:11; 11:16. Prostrating “to the face” of the honoree is found in 2 Sam 14:33; 1 Kgs 1:23; 1 Chr 16:29; 21:21; Ps 45:12; Isa 49:23; Ezek 8:16.

<sup>32</sup> In the LXX, see 1 Chr 29:20; 2 Esd 18:6 (κύπτω); 1 Kgs 19:18; in NT: Mark 15:19.

<sup>33</sup> Ποδοί (feet) or the footstool (ὑποπόδιον) accompany προσκυνέω in the LXX in 2 Kgs 4:37; Ps 98:5; 131:7; Isa 49:23; Jdt 14:7; in NT: Matt 28:9; Acts 10:25; Rev 3:9; 19:10; 22:8.

Notice that the actions of “falling” and “prostrating” “on the ground” occur in front of people and in front of deity. Yet, the typical approach by English Bibles is to translate הרה or προσκυνέω as “bow down” when proskynesis occurs before people but as “worship” when it is performed before deity. However, the contexts of scores of biblical passages demonstrate no difference between הרה (LXX προσκυνέω) before humans or before deity. In the sixty-three verses in the LXX where προσκυνέω appears with prostration indicators, the action is performed before a person in thirty verses, before deity in thirty-two verses,<sup>34</sup> and before angels in two verses.<sup>35</sup>

The examples of prostration before deity are numerous. At the dedication of the temple, all the people of Israel fall on their faces and prostrate themselves (2 Chr 7:3). Later, Jehoshaphat and the inhabitants of Jerusalem also fall and prostrate (2 Chr 20:18), as does Hezekiah and the Levites (2 Chr 29:28-30). At the cleansing of the temple, all the Jews fall on their faces and prostrate to God (1 Macc 4:55). In the oft-cited Psalm (“Come, let us worship and bow down”), the Psalmist actually says, “Come, let us prostrate and fall down (προσπίπτω) to Him” (Ps 94:6 LXX). In Revelation, the elders and the four living creatures fall on their faces and prostrate to God (Rv 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). Falling and prostrating also occurs in “idol worship,” i.e., prostrating to false gods. In Babylon, Daniel is commanded to fall down and prostrate to the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3:5-7, 10-11, 15). In the temptation, Jesus is asked to fall down and prostrate to Satan (Mt 4:9). These passages reveal no difference between falling and prostrating to people, to God, or to false gods. Since the additional prostration

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<sup>34</sup> Eight of these thirty-two verses depict prostration before an idol or a false god.

<sup>35</sup> In one LXX verse (1 Chr 29:20), the same gesture of προσκυνέω is performed before man and God: κάμψαντες τὰ γόνατα προσεκύνησαν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ τῷ βασιλεῖ.

indicators make clear that προσκυνέω denotes prostration in all these verses, one would think that English translations would consistently translate *יהי* or προσκυνέω as “prostrate” regardless of whether it is performed before a person or before a deity. But they do not. These translations persist in assuming that προσκυνέω before people means “bowing down” and προσκυνέω before deity means “worship.” But the context clearly reveals that προσκυνέω indicates prostration, regardless of whether it is performed before people or deity.

A close analysis of all 204 occurrences of προσκυνέω in the LXX<sup>36</sup> reveals that the word can be understood as indicating prostration in every case except one, where it means “to submit,” which is a metaphorical use of the word.<sup>37</sup> In the NT, προσκυνέω can also be understood as depicting proskynesis in every case. The same is true when προσκυνέω is used in temple contexts (e.g., John 4:20–24; Acts 8:27). Contrary to the approach by English Bible versions, προσκυνέω should continue to indicate prostration even when the word appears in a temple context. When performed in a temple, προσκυνέω connotes the obligatory ritual gesture of prostrating before the deity as a formal demonstration of submission and allegiance.

#### Prostration in a Temple in the OT

When προσκυνέω occurs in a temple or shrine, modern English readers are accustomed to seeing the familiar translation of “worship,” as in “going to the temple to worship.” However, it is clear in the LXX that when προσκυνέω occurs in a temple context, the

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<sup>36</sup> The canonical OT contains 181, and the OT Apocrypha has twenty-three.

<sup>37</sup> The one metaphorical use of προσκυνέω in the LXX is in 4 Macc 5:12, where προσκυνήσας μου τὴν φιλόανθρωπον παρηγορίαν should be translated as “submitting to my humane advice.”

word continues to denote prostration. For example, at the dedication of Solomon’s temple, all the people of Israel saw fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple. After they fell down (ἔπεσον) on their faces (ἐπὶ πρόσωπον) on the ground (ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν) on the pavement (ἐπὶ τὸ λιθόστρωτον), they prostrated to the Lord (προσεκύνησαν ... τῷ κυρίῳ, 2 Chr 7:3). Here, the additional prostration indicators of “falling down,” “on their faces,” “on the ground,” and “on the pavement,” make it clear that προσεκύνησαν means “they prostrated.” In addition, the προσ- prefix and the dative τῷ κυρίῳ provide the directional component of prostrating “toward” the presumed location of Yahweh. The writer paints a dramatic picture of all the Israelites prostrating in humble choreographed unity toward the Most Holy Place, the veritable “dwelling place of God on earth.” However, in spite of these many clear indicators of prostration, all the major English Bibles erroneously translate the verse with “worshiped.”

The LXX contains more than two dozen examples of προσκυνέω in a temple<sup>38</sup> where the text includes additional prostration indicators such as stooping or bowing (κύπτω), falling down (πίπτω, προσπίπτω, προπίπτω), performing the act “in front of” or “before” (ἐνώπιον, ἔναντι, ἐναντίον, κατέναντι) the deity, falling on the “face” (πρόσωπον) or “knees” (γόνατα), and falling at the “feet” (ποδοί) of the deity. All these contexts support the idea that people went to the temple to perform their obligatory ritual prostration to their deity. The modern mind is so full of the idea that people “worship” in a temple, and so far separated from the cultural reality and significance of the gesture of

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<sup>38</sup> See temple prostration in 2 Kgs 5:18; 18:22; 1 Chr 16:29–30; 29:20; 2 Chr 7:3; 20:18; 29:29–30; 32:12; 2 Esd 18:6 (Neh 8:6); Ps 5:8; 94:6; 95:8–9; 131:7; 137:2 (all in LXX); Isa 27:13; 66:23; Jer 33:2 LXX; Ezek 8:16; 46:2, 3, 9; Jdt 16:18; 1 Macc 4:55; Zech 14:16–17; cf. John 4:21, 23, 24; 12:20; Acts 7:43; 8:27; 24:11; Rev 11:1.

prostration, it has difficulty grasping the idea that προσκυνέω actually denotes prostration.

Ezekiel’s vision of the temple (Ezek 46:2–9) provides another good example of προσκυνέω denoting proskynesis in a sacred place. In this passage, the Lord specifies the exact location inside the temple where people were to perform proskynesis. On Sabbaths and new moons, after entering via the east gate, the prince was to prostrate (הִתְחַנַּף, LXX προσκυνέω) at the threshold of the gate, and the people of the land would also prostrate at the doorway of that gate (46:2–3). However, when the people of the land “come before the Lord at the appointed feasts,” one who enters through the north gate to prostrate (הִתְחַנַּף, LXX προσκυνέω) was to exit through the south gate (46:9). A key indicator that prostration is intended comes from the idea that this act is performed “before the Lord” (לְפָנַי יְהוָה, LXX ἐναντίον κυρίου, 46:3, 9). The act of prostration indicated by προσκυνέω is always performed in front of and in the presence of the intended recipient of the action, regardless of whether it is done before man or deity.<sup>39</sup> Since the passage identifies a specific spot for this act of proskynesis and then directs people to immediately proceed out of the temple, several English translations of this passage realize that “worship” is an inadequate translation. Consequently, some English versions render the Hebrew word as “bow down” (CEB, NET, NRSV) or “bow in worship” or “bow down in worship” (CSB, HCSB, NABRE, NIV, NLT). Actually, the additional words “in worship” are unnecessary if the reader understands that the act of proskynesis was always an obligatory act of respect, submission, and allegiance.

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<sup>39</sup> A notable exception is Ex 24:1, where Moses is allowed to come near (ἐγγιεῖ) the Lord, but the others are to perform proskynesis from a distance (προσκυνησουσιν μακρόθεν τῷ κυρίῳ).

## The Foundational Principle for Temple Prostration

Deut 16:16 provides the foundational principle for this visit to the temple for the feasts: “Three times in a year all your males shall appear before the Lord (הַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ) your God<sup>40</sup> in the place which He chooses ... and they shall not appear before the Lord (הַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ) empty-handed.” “The place which He chooses” is the temple.<sup>41</sup> In these three visits, when a Jewish male appeared “before the Lord” at the temple, there is only one appropriate way for the Jew to present himself in the presence of God: prostration. The second requirement of this visit is to not be “empty-handed,” but to have an offering or sacrifice to present to Yahweh.<sup>42</sup> This second action is expressed by the Greek word λατρεύω. (See the section below on “The Two Fundamental Religious Obligations.”)

The obligatory act of prostrating in a temple was also customary for pagans and idolaters.<sup>43</sup> 2 Kgs 19:37 depicts an example of prostration in an idol’s temple: “As Sennacherib was performing proskynesis (προσκυνοῦντος) in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword.”<sup>44</sup> The Hebrew reader knows

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<sup>40</sup> Literally, “before the face of the Lord your God” (הַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ). See also Exod 23:14–17; 34:23–24; Deut 31:11.

<sup>41</sup> Since the temple had not yet been built, it is described in Deuteronomy as “the place which He chooses.” The temple is clearly identified as this “place” in Deut 12:5, 11, 14, 21. It was “the place in which the Lord your God will choose for His name to dwell,” God’s dwelling place, and Jews were required to bring all their offerings and sacrifices to this place (Deut 12:11).

<sup>42</sup> See Mic 6:6: “With what shall I come to the Lord and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves?” “Coming to” and “bowing before” the Lord are common indicators of prostration.

<sup>43</sup> For examples of pagans bowing down and prostrating in a temple, see 2 Kgs 5:18; 19:37; Isa 37:38; Ezek 8:16–17; cf. Acts 7:43. In addition, the many warnings against prostrating and sacrificing (προσκυνέω and λατρεύω/δουλεύω/θύω) to foreign gods are likely references to temple activities (cf. Exod 20:5, 23:24; Deut 4:19; 5:9; 8:19; 11:16; 17:3; 29:25 LXX; 30:17).

<sup>44</sup> Translation by author.



that prostration is done with the head down, making Sennacherib an easy target for the sword of Adrammelech and Sharezer. The verse does not need to add that he was “on his face” or “on the ground.” These ideas are inherent in προσκυνέω.

2 Kgs 5:18 contains a similar depiction of προσκυνέω in a temple. Naaman pleads to Elisha for forgiveness, saying (in the NASB), “When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship (LXX προσκυνῆσαι, תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה־לְ) there, and he leans on my hand and I bow down (LXX προσκυνήσω, יִתְיַבֵּן עַל יָדִי) in the house of Rimmon, when I bow down (LXX προσκυνεῖν, יִתְיַבֵּן עַל יָדֶיךָ) in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord please forgive your servant in this matter.” Why would Naaman mention that his master leans on Naaman’s hand? In this verse, the writer mentions proskynesis (הִיָּח, LXX προσκυνέω) three times, making it clear that proskynesis is the offending behavior. The ancient readers would have immediately understood that προσκυνέω (הִיָּח) refers to prostration. The writer paints a picture of the servant Naaman being required to assume a position resembling prostration as he assists his (probably elderly) master to get down to the ground to perform his obligatory proskynesis and then to help the master stand up again. Naaman knows that performing proskynesis to a foreign god is strictly forbidden in Israel; so, he pleads to the prophet Elisha for mercy for this idolatrous act. In more than two dozen other examples in the LXX when προσκυνεῖν occurs in a temple context, this action clearly refers to the person performing their obligatory proskynesis to Yahweh, complying with the command of Deut 16:16 and demonstrating their submission and allegiance to the God of Israel.

Προσκυνέω as a Greeting

Another reason why προσκυνέω in a temple should be viewed as prostration stems from the word's function as a greeting. Several ancient sources demonstrate that προσκυνέω depicts a special kind of greeting,<sup>45</sup> and this includes the compulsory greeting—or the presentation of oneself—to one's god when entering that god's dwelling place or temple. Around 430 BC, Herodotus described the different ways that Persians greet one another. If two equals greet one another, they kiss each other on the lips. If there is a slight difference in rank, the cheek is kissed. But if the difference in rank is great, the person of lower stature falls toward the other and prostrates (προσπίπτων προσκυνέει τὸν ἕτερον).<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, Hans Windisch in *TDNT* says that προσκυνέω is a “particularly respectful form of ἀσπασμός (greeting).”<sup>47</sup> Regardless of whether the act is performed before humans, God, or any deity, prostration continues as the appropriate way to come into the presence of—and greet—an honored one. In ancient Middle Eastern culture, temples were viewed as the dwelling place of the deity.<sup>48</sup> When one enters the deity's dwelling place, as Ezekiel reports, the only proper gesture is proskynesis (Ezek 46:2–9).

The idea that προσκυνέω is a greeting is also supported by its many uses with the terms “come” and “before.” Prior to greeting an honored person, one must first “come”

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<sup>45</sup> Prostration greetings that are outside of a temple context are: Gen 19:1; 33:3; 42:6; 43:26; 1 Sam 20:41; 24:9 LXX; 25:23, 41; 2 Sam 1:2; 9:6; 14:4, 33; 18:28; 24:20; 1 Kgs 1:16, 23; 2 Kgs 2:15; 4:37; 1 Chr 21:21; Jdt 10:23; Matt 2:11; Acts 10:25.

<sup>46</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, 134.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Windisch, “ἀσπάζομαι, etc.,” *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:498.

<sup>48</sup> In the OT, the temple was frequently called the “dwelling place of God” (Exod 15:17; 25:8; 29:42–45; Deut 12:5, 7, 11; 2 Sam 7:5–7; 1 Kgs 6:13; 8:13; 39; 1 Chr 17:3ff.; 23:25; 2 Chr 2:3; 6:1; 36:15; Ps 15:1; 27:4; 74:7; 76:2; Joel 3:17; Zech 8:3; Matt 23:21; et al.) and the “house of the Lord” (1 Kgs 6:1; 1 Chr 6:32; 2 Chr 36:14; Ezra 1:5; 6:3–8ff.; Ps 116:19; Jer 27:18; Ezek 11:1; et al.).

into their presence.<sup>49</sup> Then, in the presence of the honored one, the prostrator formally demonstrates submission and/or respect by prostrating “before” the honoree. “Come,” which is used with προσκυνέω twenty-three times in the LXX and fifteen times in the NT, is frequently used with prostration to people<sup>50</sup> as well as prostration to God in a temple.<sup>51</sup> For example, when Jacob sees Esau and 400 men approaching him, Jacob goes (LXX προέρχομαι) and prostrates “on the ground” seven times until he arrives near his brother (Gen 33:3). In 2 Kgs 2:15, the sons of the prophets “came” (LXX ἔρχομαι) to Elisha, and they “prostrated to him on the ground” (LXX προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν). But in Ps 5:8, David says he will enter (LXX εἰσέρχομαι) God’s house, and “I will prostrate toward your holy temple” (προσκυνήσω πρὸς ναὸν ἁγίόν σου).<sup>52</sup>

The word “before” (e.g., ἐνώπιον) is used similarly with προσκυνέω, since the gesture of prostration must be done “in front of” the one being honored by this ancient

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<sup>49</sup> Various verbs are used to indicate the approach, such as ἔρχομαι (in LXX: Gen 37:10; 42:6; 2 Kgs 2:15; Jer 33:2; in NT: Matt 2:2, 8, 11; 9:18; 15:25; Acts 8:27), εἰσέρχομαι or εἰσπορεύομαι (in LXX: 2 Sam 1:2; 14:4, 33; 1 Kgs 1:23; 2:13; 2 Kgs 4:37; 2 Kgs 5:18; 2 Chr 24:18; Ps 5:8; Ps 95:8–9; Ps 132:7; Ezek 46:2, 9), προσέρχομαι (Matt 8:2; 20:20; 28:9), ἤκω (in LXX: Ps 85:9; Isa 66:23; in NT: Rev 3:9; 15:4), ἐξέρχομαι (in LXX: 2 Sam 24:20; 1 Chr 21:21), ἐγγίζω or προσεγγίζω (in LXX: Gen 33:7; 2 Sam 15:5). Other verbs that generate the similar idea are τρέχω (Mark 5:6), ἀναβαίνω (John 12:20; Acts 24:11), and possibly συναντάω (Acts 10:25).

<sup>50</sup> The idea of “coming” and prostrating before people is found in the LXX in Gen 33:7 (2); 37:10; 42:6; 2 Sam 1:2; 14:4, 33; 15:5; 24:20; 1 Kgs 1:23; 2:13; 2 Kgs 2:15; 4:37; 5:18; 1 Chr 21:21; 2 Chr 24:17; and in the NT in Matt 8:2; 9:18; 15:25; 20:20; Mark 5:6; Rev 3:9.

<sup>51</sup> The idea of “coming” (or “going”) and prostrating before God in a temple is found in the LXX in Ps 5:8 (εἰσέρχομαι); Ps 85:9; Ps 95:9; Ps 131:7; Isa 66:23; Jer 33:2; Ezek 46:2, 9; and in the NT in John 12:20; Acts 8:27; 24:11; John 12:20; Acts 24:11; cf. Rev 15:4.

<sup>52</sup> Translation of 2 Kgs 2:15 and Ps 5:8 is by the author.

greeting custom.<sup>53</sup> The [προσκυνέω + before] construction, which is found twenty-three times in the LXX and eight times in the NT, is also used before people<sup>54</sup> or before deity in a temple.<sup>55</sup> For example, this language describes proskynesis before a human in 1 Sm 25:23, when Abigail “fell before David upon her face and prostrated to him upon the ground” (ἔπεσεν ἐνώπιον Δαυιδ ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῆς καὶ προσεκύνησεν αὐτῷ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν).<sup>56</sup> Similar language is used to describe proskynesis before the Lord in 2 Chr 20:18. Here, “the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord to prostrate to the Lord” (οἱ κατοικοῦντες Ἱερουσαλημ ἔπεσαν ἔναντι κυρίου προσκυνῆσαι κυρίῳ).<sup>57</sup>

In all these “before” contexts, English translations are inconsistent on how they translate προσκυνέω. When proskynesis occurs “before” a person, English versions commonly say, “bow down.” But when it is done “before” God in a temple, English Bibles commonly translate προσκυνέω as “worship.” Yet, the Greek and the Hebrew show no distinction between the two acts. The idea that the act of proskynesis (προσκυνέω) was an obligatory and customary greeting gesture—before a human or a deity—is well substantiated throughout the Septuagint.

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<sup>53</sup> To connote the idea of “before,” the LXX uses terms such as ἐνώπιον, ἔναντι, ἐναντίον, or κατέναντι (Gen 23:12; Deut 26:10; 1 Sam 25:23; 2 Kgs 18:22; 2 Chr 20:18; 25:14; 32:12; Ps 21:28; Ps 85:9; Ps 94:6; Isa 66:23; Ezek 46:3, 9; Dan 3:7; and in NT in Luke 4:7; Rev 3:9; 4:10; 7:11; 11:16; 15:4), πρὸς (in LXX: Exod 11:8; 2 Sam 1:2; 9:6; 14:4, 33; 1 Kgs 2:13; Ps 5:8; Ps 137:2; Ezek 8:16), or ἔμπροσθεν (Rev 19:10; 22:8).

<sup>54</sup> Prostration is found “before” people in the LXX in Gen 23:12; Exod 11:8; 1 Sam 25:23; 2 Sam 1:2; 9:6; 14:4, 33; 1 Kgs 2:13; see also Rev 3:9 and in Rev 19:10 and 22:8, where prostration occurs before the angel.

<sup>55</sup> Prostration is found “before” deity in a temple in the LXX in Deut 26:10; 2 Kgs 18:22; 2 Chr 20:18; 25:14 (gods); 32:12; Ps 21:28; Ps 5:8; Ps 85:9; Ps 94:6; Ps 137:2 (πρὸς); Isa 66:23; Ezek 8:16; 46:3, 9; Dan 3:7; in the NT in Rev 4:10; 7:11; 11:16; cf. Rev 15:4.

<sup>56</sup> Translation by author.

<sup>57</sup> Translation by author.

## Prostration in a Temple in the NT

Does προσκυνέω continue to connote proskynesis when it appears in temple contexts in the NT? The NT contains several passages that use προσκυνέω to describe—or perhaps summarize—the reason for going to the temple. For example, the Gospel of John records the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman about the proper “place where men ought προσκυνεῖν” (John 4:20–24), and John also refers to some Greeks “who were going up ἵνα προσκυνήσωσιν at the feast” (John 12:20). Acts mentions the eunuch, who “had come to Jerusalem προσκυνήσων,” (Acts 8:27) and Paul, who “went up to Jerusalem προσκυνήσων” (Acts 24:11). Revelation includes several verses that describe angels and others gathered around the throne where they προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ (Rev 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:1, 16; 19:4), and the setting for these passages is likely the heavenly temple (7:15; 11:1, 19). Revelation also includes several references to those who perform proskynesis to “the image” of the beast (Rev 13:15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), and it is likely that this “image” was a statue in a temple.<sup>58</sup> So, in these temple contexts, does προσκυνέω continue to connote the act of proskynesis, or does it refer to “worship”?

Some of these NT passages do not include a direct object for προσκυνέω, such as Acts 24:11 (NASB: “went up to Jerusalem to worship”). This use of προσκυνέω has prompted Johannes Nützel (*EDNT*) to claim that προσκυνέω is a technical term for “participation in temple worship” and for “Jewish pilgrimage to Jerusalem.”<sup>59</sup> Nützel seems to be repeating a statement by Heinrich Greeven in *TDNT* that προσκυνέω is here

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<sup>58</sup> See also Acts 7:43, where Israel is accused of taking the images of Moloch and Rompha and προσκυνεῖν αὐτοῖς.

<sup>59</sup> Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., “προσκυνέω,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (EDNT)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:174.

being used as a “technical use of the word for the pilgrimage of Jews to Jerusalem.”<sup>60</sup>

However, there is no evidence that προσκυνέω connotes a “pilgrimage” or travel of any kind. In these verses, the action of προσκυνέω is not the pilgrimage; it is rather the action that one performs at the temple at the end of the pilgrimage journey.

In these verses, one might speculate that the meaning of προσκυνέω has broadened from “to perform proskynesis” to “to participate in temple rituals,” of which prostration was one. If the meaning has broadened, this begs the question, “What required rituals were included within the scope of προσκυνέω?” Deut 16:16 suggests that prostration and sacrifice were the primary tasks of temple visits. So, in John 12:20 the Greek proselytes were going to the temple, as required for the thrice-yearly feasts, to offer their formal proskynesis to the God of Israel and bring the appropriate sacrifices. Similarly, in Acts 8:27 the Ethiopian eunuch had gone to the temple to offer proskynesis to Yahweh and offer the required sacrifices. In Acts 24:11 Paul’s visit to Jerusalem was his attempt to show that he was conforming to the Law (Acts 21:24) by going through seven days of purification and offering the required sacrifices (Acts 21:26–27) in the temple.

Yet, several Revelation passages indicate that προσκυνέω, when performed in a temple context, continues to refer specifically to prostration. For example, Rev 11:1 refers to “temple of God and the altar, and those who worship (τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας) in it” (NASB). As John explains a few verses later, in Rev 11:16 (NASB), “The twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God” (προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ). Here, the text includes three prostration indicators: “fell,” “on

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<sup>60</sup> Greeven, *TDNT*, 6:764.

their faces,” and “before God.” So, προσκυνέω in Rev 11:1 should be understood in its classic sense of prostration: “measure the temple of God and the altar, and those who perform proskynesis in it.” Throughout Revelation, those who surround God on the throne are described five times as “falling down” (πίπτω) and performing proskynesis (Rev 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4; cf. 5:8; 19:10; 22:8–9). Two of these verses specifically mention the prostration indicators that they are “on their faces” (ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν, Rev 7:11; 11:16), while four verses mention that they are “before” the throne (ἐνώπιον, Rev 4:10; 7:11; 11:16; 15:4; cf. Rev 3:9; 4:4–5; 5:8; 7:9, 15; 8:2–4; 9:13; 11:4; 14:3; 20:12). This understanding is consistent with the frequent picture of temple prostration throughout the LXX.

The *NIDNTTE* claims that, in these five verses in Revelation, “this physical sense (of prostration) has clearly receded so that the verb means simply ‘to worship’.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, the physical sense of prostration appears to remain intact in these verses as is indicated by “fell on their faces” in Rev 11:16 as well as the use of πίπτω with προσκυνέω in Rev 5:8, 14; 7:11; 19:4, 10; 22:8–9. As noted earlier, of the 265 occurrences of προσκυνέω in the LXX and the NT, the term does not refer to the temple activities of sacrificing, prayer, singing, or the conducting of liturgy.<sup>62</sup> The vast weight of evidence indicates that these non-prostration temple activities are separate events that are not included within the semantic range of προσκυνέω. Consequently, when a NT writer (e.g., Luke or John)

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<sup>61</sup> Silva, ed., *NIDNTTE*, 4:152.

<sup>62</sup> Gen 22:5 is a possible exception, where the term seems to refer to Abraham’s intended act of sacrificing. It should be noted that this verse is the first reference to προσκυνέω or ἠῆ in Genesis, reflecting a primitive time in Hebrew culture, before the temple was built. It is possible that ancient Hebrews connected the two acts of prostrating and sacrificing since the two were separate but concomitant ritual acts.

refers to coming to Jerusalem to perform προσκυνέω, it is consistent to presume that he is referring to coming to the temple to perform one's obligatory prostration before God (Deut 16:16).

### Problems with “Worship”

Translating προσκυνέω as “worship” is problematic because the modern English perception of “worship” connotes common (church) activities such as singing, praying, or conducting liturgy. However, ἡἡ and προσκυνέω do not connote any of these activities in the hundreds of biblical texts that contain these words. Prayer and prostration may appear to be similar activities, but the connection is only coincidental.<sup>63</sup> In all 204 cases of προσκυνέω in the LXX and in all 61 cases of προσκυνέω in the NT, praying is not described as a part of the action performed.<sup>64</sup> Singing appears in the context of only four verses where προσκυνέω appears in the LXX and the NT, but in each case, the singing and the prostration are distinct and separate actions.<sup>65</sup>

For example, when the NASB says that the Ethiopian eunuch “had come to Jerusalem to worship” (προσκυνέω, Acts 8:27), the modern reader might assume that the eunuch went there to sing songs of praise or to participate in leader-led liturgy. However, neither of these ideas is inherent in προσκυνέω. Whenever English Bibles translate προσκυνέω as “worship,” the modern English reader misunderstands the writer's

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<sup>63</sup> Delling says, “Proskynesis is basically a sign of respect, not a posture of prayer,” in Gerhard Delling, *Worship in the New Testament*, trans. Percy Scott (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 105; cf. Greeven, “προσκυνέω,” *TDNT*, 6:765). The *NIDNTTE* claims that, in the book of Revelation, “προσκυνέω comes to denote in particular the prayer of adoration,” but it offers no evidence (Silva, ed., “προσκυνέω,” *NIDNTTE*, 4:152).

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Isa 44:17; 2 Chr 7:3; Sir 50:17–19.

<sup>65</sup> The four LXX verses are: 2 Chr 29:28; Ps 65:4; 137:1–2; Sir 50:17–18.



reference to the widely practiced ancient cultural gesture of proskynesis. As noted, in a few cases of a temple context, προσκυνέω and λατρεύω refer to the two fundamental obligations of offering proskynesis and sacrifice.

### The Two Fundamental Religious Obligations

The depiction of proskynesis as the focus of one's visit to the temple is also made clear by a study of λατρεύω throughout the LXX and NT. In the LXX, προσκυνέω and λατρεύω are frequently coupled as the two fundamental obligatory activities performed for one's god, usually in a temple. For Jews, these two duties were made clear in Deut 16:16, which required every male Jew to "appear before the Lord" (demonstrated by proskynesis) and to bring an appropriate offering or sacrifice. As the second commandment of the Decalogue mandates, "You shall not prostrate to (προσκυνήσεις) or serve sacrifices to" (λατρεύσης) idols or other gods (Exod 20:5).<sup>66</sup> Jesus referred to this commandment when he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness: "You shall prostrate to (προσκυνήσεις) the Lord your God and to him alone you shall sacrifice (λατρεύσεις)" (Matt 4:10 and Luke 4:8). 2 Kgs 17:36 expresses the mandate succinctly: "To him you shall prostrate, and to him you shall sacrifice" (αὐτῷ προσκυνήσετε καὶ αὐτῷ θύσετε).<sup>67</sup> A long list of [προσκυνέω + λατρεύω] verses<sup>68</sup> supports the idea that the customary

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<sup>66</sup> Translation by author. As has been defended by H. Strathmann, the Greek λατρεύω and the Hebrew לָבַח, in such contexts, refer to serving the deity with sacrifice. See H. Strathmann, "λατρεύω, λατρεία," *TDNT*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:60–61.

<sup>67</sup> Translation by author.

<sup>68</sup> The two terms are coupled in Exod 20:5, 23:24; Deut 4:19; 5:9; 8:19; 11:16; 17:3; 29:25 LXX; 30:17; Josh 23:7, 16; Judg 2:11–13, 19; 2 Kgs 17:16, 35, 36; 21:(3), 21; 2 Chr 7:19, 22; Dan 3:12, 14, 18, 28; 6:27 LXX; Matt 4:10; Luke 4:8; cf. Jer 16:11; Acts 7:42–43. Προσκυνέω + δουλεύω (instead of λατρεύω) likely has the same likely meaning (1 Kgs 9:6, 9; 16:31; 22:53; 2 Chr 33:3; Ps 71:11 LXX; Jer 8:2; 13:10; 16:11;

religious practice was to enter the presence of the deity (in a temple) and then perform proskynesis and offer sacrifice.<sup>69</sup> For example, when the wise men (the magi) from the East find the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, they fall (πίπτω), prostrate (προσκυνέω), and offer gifts (Matt 2:11). The Second Commandment demands that these two activities must not be performed for any other gods.

The modern English concept of “worship” is not always a visible act. But prostrating and sacrificing are physical and observable acts, and they are presented as such in the OT and NT. If a Jew engaged in prostrating or sacrificing to another god, these actions could be clearly detected and would be severely punished. Throughout the OT, the strongest possible terms are used to describe the egregiousness of violating the second commandment against prostrating and sacrificing to other gods. Such activity is called an “abomination”<sup>70</sup> that “provokes” God’s wrath,<sup>71</sup> and “kindles” His anger,<sup>72</sup> which then incurs horrific and severe punishments.<sup>73</sup> The reason for these punishments is clear: “If you ever forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and sacrifice to them

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22:9; 25:6; Dan 6:28 LXX), as does προσκυνέω + θύω (1 Sam 1:3; Exod 32:8; 2 Kgs 17:36; 2 Chr 25:14; Jer 1:16; cf. 2 Chr 32:12; 1 Macc 4:53–55; Jdt 16:18).

<sup>69</sup> The English word ‘mosque’ derives from the Arabic *masjid*, which means “place of prostration,” that is, the place where the faithful come to prostrate before their God. See John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 38; Rusmir Mahmutcehajic, *The Mosque: The Heart of Submission* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 11, 84–85.

<sup>70</sup> Deut 7:25; 27:15; 32:16; 2 Kgs 21:11; Isa 44:19; Ezek 8:6, 9, 17.

<sup>71</sup> Deut 32:21; 2 Kgs 21:11, 15; 22:17; 2 Chr 34:25; Isa 65:3; Jer 7:18; 8:19; 25:6–7; 32:29–32; Ezek 8:3, 17; 16:26; Zech 8:14.

<sup>72</sup> Num 25:3; Deut 6:14; 7:4; 11:17; 29:27–28; 31:16; 32:22; Josh 23:16; Judg 2:13–14; 3:7; 10:6–7; 2 Kgs 22:17; 23:26; Ps 106:40; Isa 10:16; Jer 17:4; 44:3–6.

<sup>73</sup> Deut 6:14; 7:4; 11:17 (no rain or fruit), 26–28 (“a curse”); 29:28; 31:17 (“evils and troubles”); 32:23–24; Josh 23:16; Judg 2:14; 3:7–8; 10:6–8; 1 Sam 26:19; 2 Kgs 21:12 (“such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle”); 23:27; Ps 106:41–42; Isa 10:16; Jer 8:2; 16:4, 13; 17:3–4; 25:33 (“they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground”); 32:29, 31; 44:2, 8; Zech 8:14.

and prostrate to them (καὶ λατρείης αὐτοῖς καὶ προσκυνήσης αὐτοῖς), I testify against you today that you will surely perish” (Deut 8:19).<sup>74</sup> Because of the centrality of the Decalogue to every Jew, and because of the severity of punishment for violating the second commandment, it is likely that every Jew in the first century was trained from childhood in the proper practice of prostrating (προσκυνέω) and sacrificing (λατρεύω/θύω). They learned that prostration, as a religious act, was something given only to Yahweh. In the NT, the fundamental theme of the implications of religious prostration are taken up in the book of Revelation, where the act of προσκυνέω itself becomes the separator between the faithful and those who are cast into the lake of fire (Rev 19:20; 20:4).

#### Adoration and Prostration

Why would English Bibles persistently translate προσκυνέω as “worship”? This practice may have emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries through the influence of the Latin word *adorare* (adore).<sup>75</sup> The Latin Vulgate, produced by Jerome ca. AD 400, used the Latin *adorare*<sup>76</sup> to translate nearly every occurrence of כָּרַע in the OT and προσκυνέω in the NT.<sup>77</sup> So, did *adorare* mean “to worship” (as a feeling of reverence) or “to prostrate oneself” (as a bodily gesture)?

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<sup>74</sup> Translation by author.

<sup>75</sup> A full study of the etymology of the English word ‘worship’ is outside the scope of this paper, but in the 1400s and 1500s, one of the meanings of ‘worship’ was “to bow down to.” See “Worship,” *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2:3826.

<sup>76</sup> *Adorare* has been thought to be a compound verb formed from *ad* (toward) + *orare* (to pray/beg). See Marti, “Proskynesis and Adorare,” 279–80.

<sup>77</sup> The current version of the Latin Vulgate translates the 170 occurrences of כָּרַע with the Latin term *adorare* 167 times, twice with *incurvare* (to bow down, Gen 27:29b; 33:6), once with *salutare* (to greet, 2 Sam 15:5), and once with *orare* (to pray/beg, 1 Sam

In the time of Jerome, *adorare* connoted prostration. In the third century, *adoratio* (the noun form of *adorare*) was understood in the Roman Empire as the act of prostrating oneself.<sup>78</sup> Jerome records that Diocletian ordered people to prostrate to him as a god (*Diocletianus adorari se ut deum*).<sup>79</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, which describes cultural concepts in Europe and the Mediterranean for the period between AD 250 and 750, describes *adoratio* as a court ceremony in which “the participant performed *proskynesis* (prostration).”<sup>80</sup>

Centuries later, Leonardo DaVinci’s famous 1481 painting, “The Adoration of the Magi,” depicts the wise men cowering on their knees with their hands on the ground, bowing to the baby Jesus. So, even in the fifteenth century, this “adoration” seems to be *proskynesis*. The 1582 Rheims New Testament translated almost all sixty-one cases of the Latin *adorare* with the English word “adore.”<sup>81</sup> For example, when προσκυνέω (*adorare*) appears three times in the story of the magi “falling down” and prostrating before Jesus in Matt 2:1–11, the Rheims NT translates the term each time as “adore.”<sup>82</sup>

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2:36). In the NT, the only time when προσκυνέω was not translated with *adorare* is in Matt 18:26, where προσκυνέω is translated with *orare* (to pray/beg).

<sup>78</sup> See the detailed study by William T. Avery, “The ‘*Adoratio Purpurae*’ and the Importance of the Imperial Purple in the Fourth Century of the Christian Era,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 17 (1940): 66–80. Avery says that the simple form of *adoratio* in the third century involved only prostration without kissing the purple robe of the emperor, which he describes as *adoratio purpurae* (p. 71).

<sup>79</sup> Jerome, *Chronicon*, Diocletianus 33.11.

<sup>80</sup> Muriel Moser, “*adoratio*,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, ed., Oliver Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1:22. The dictionary’s entry for “*proskynesis*” says, “See *adoratio*” (2:1243).

<sup>81</sup> Even as late as 1899, the Douay-Rheims versions translated John 4:23 as “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true adorers shall adore the Father in spirit and in truth. For the Father also seeketh such to adore him.”

<sup>82</sup> The original 1582 Rheims NT of Matt 2:11 says, “they found the childe with Marie his mother & faling downe adored him” (sic). The 1582 Rheims NT can be viewed online at <https://archive.org/details/newtestamentofie00engl>.

This sixteenth century use of this term in the infancy narrative likely gave rise to the later idea of “adoring” Jesus in certain lines of English Christmas carols, such as “O come let us adore him,”<sup>83</sup> “Come, adore on bended knee,”<sup>84</sup> and “Christ, by highest heaven adored.”<sup>85</sup> But what did the English term ‘adore’ mean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Even as late as the 1880s, “adoration” could be understood as “prostration” in the English-speaking world. McClintock and Strong’s 1883 12-volume Bible encyclopedia includes a lengthy entry on “Adoration” that says the word denotes “an act of worship,” noting that the act is usually prostration: “(Hebrew) prostration was conducted in a more formal manner, the person falling upon the knee, and then gradually inclining the body until the forehead touched the ground.”<sup>86</sup> So, even though modern ears hear the concept of “adoring” as loving, admiring, or perhaps as “worship,”<sup>87</sup> the English term ‘adore’ and its Latin counterpart ‘*adorare*’—for hundreds of years before the present era—often connoted prostration. Yet today, ‘adore’ is usually understood as a feeling and not the gesture of proskynesis. In similar fashion, the English term ‘worship’ usually connotes a feeling of reverence and not the gesture of proskynesis.

#### The Case of John 4:20–24

Even though this analysis reveals that προσκυνέω refers to prostration, modern commentators have often assumed that the oft-quoted John 4:20–24 passage about

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<sup>83</sup> “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” John Francis Wade, ca. 1743.

<sup>84</sup> “Angels We Have Heard On High,” author unknown, ca. 1862.

<sup>85</sup> “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” Charles Wesley, 1739.

<sup>86</sup> John McClintock and James Strong, eds. *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883), 1:79–80. See a similar definition of “adoration” from the same era, in *Smith’s Bible Dictionary* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1886), 8.

<sup>87</sup> “Adore,” *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 17.

προσκυνέω “in spirit and truth” refers to Christian assembly activity. A review of a dozen major commentaries published since Bultmann reveals that none of them questions the idea that προσκυνέω refers to “worship” in the modern sense of activity in a Christian assembly.<sup>88</sup> The only exception is John McHugh’s 2009 commentary on John. He makes clear that προσκυνέω typically means “*prostrating oneself*,” “*to show reverence by prostration*,” and “*bowing down in reverence*”<sup>89</sup> (italics are his). Yet, he ultimately returns to saying that John 4 is about “worship,” alleging that προσκυνέω refers to “offering liturgical praise to Yahweh.”<sup>90</sup> However, “offering liturgical praise” is a meaning that προσκυνέω does not connote anywhere in the LXX or the NT.

So, what does προσκυνέω mean in John 4? This question is usually ignored by modern commentators who assume that προσκυνέω means “worship.” Consequently, debate about the meaning of “worship in spirit and truth” focuses on the meaning of “in spirit and truth.” But after studying the contexts of more than 260 occurrences of προσκυνέω in the LXX and NT, I believe that we can no longer assume that προσκυνέω means “worship.”

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<sup>88</sup> The dozen commentators are C. K. Barrett (1978), F. F. Bruce (1983), Rudolf Bultmann (1971), Gary Burge (2000), D. A. Carson (1991), Ernst Haenchen (1980), Murray Harris (2015), Craig Keener (2003), Andreas Köstenberger (2009), Barnabas Lindars (1972), John McHugh (2009), Rudolf Schnackenburg (1980).

<sup>89</sup> John F. McHugh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on John 1–4*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 283. To find a commentator who grasps the prostration connotation of προσκυνέω, one may need to reach back more than a century ago to Edwin Abbott, who translated John 4:21 as, “Neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem shall ye bow yourselves down to the Father,” in Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1906), 78–79.

<sup>90</sup> McHugh, *Commentary on John 1–4*, 285.

Since the issue in John 4 is about the location of the temple (Gerizim or Jerusalem), προσκυνέω is here being used in a temple context, which as already noted, normally connotes the obligatory gesture of prostration before the presence of the Lord. The woman's question notes that the temple was the place where prostration was *necessary* (ὅπου προσκυνεῖν δεῖ, v. 20), which likely refers to the Deut 16:16 requirement for all male Jews to go to the temple three times each year to “appear before the Lord.”

Jesus uses the woman's question as an opportunity to announce that “an hour is coming” when one's prostration to God will take place “neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem.” The parallel structure of v. 21 and v. 23 draws attention to the fact that the place of prostration (“in this mountain” or “in Jerusalem”) is being replaced by the manner of prostration (“in spirit and truth”). Since “God is spirit” (πνεῦμα ὁ θεός, v. 24), a new era is coming when such sacred places are obsolete. Since God is a spirit that cannot be confined to a specific location, the physical building and the physical gesture of proskynesis will become irrelevant. Only the spiritual sincerity (ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ) of the believer will remain.<sup>91</sup>

The ideas that God is not confined to a temple and that one's devotion should be sincere were not new. The book of Isaiah presented the same concept centuries earlier: “Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? ... But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit,

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<sup>91</sup> In Johannine writings, the anarthrous phrase ἐν ἀληθείᾳ seems to connote sincerity in Jn 17:19; 1 Jn 3:18; 2 Jn 1:1, 3, 4; 3 Jn 1:1. Yet, the meaning of this prepositional phrase has been debated for centuries and is not essential to this study. The focus of this study is the meaning of προσκυνέω.

and who trembles at My word” (Isa 66:1; cf. Isa 57:15; Mic 6:6–8).<sup>92</sup> In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also denounced outward displays of piety in giving, praying, and fasting, and He called for sincerity and humility, which the Father prefers (Matt 6:1–18).

Jesus’s groundbreaking idea that temple activity would soon become irrelevant was intriguing enough to bring the Samaritan woman closer to belief in Jesus as the Messiah (4:25–29).<sup>93</sup> In John, Jesus had already launched revolutionary ideas about the temple (2:19–21; cf. 1:14), and John 4:20–24 expands on those ideas. Köstenberger goes so far as to say that John’s Gospel was written in response to the AD 70 destruction of the temple, in an effort to calm fears and to show that Jesus fulfills all that the temple was meant to be.<sup>94</sup> Marshall concludes that John 4:24 implies “that the church is not dependent upon buildings, consecrated or otherwise, and that the development of the building as a sanctuary, as holy space, is alien to the trend in the NT which has spiritualized the temple.”<sup>95</sup>

So, even though “worship in spirit and truth” has often been applied to church meetings,<sup>96</sup> the message of John 4:20–24 has little to do with “church worship” as we

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<sup>92</sup> Beale makes the same connection between John 4 and Isaiah 66 in G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 138, 221.

<sup>93</sup> McKelvey says that John 4:24 “was of paramount significance for the future expansion of Christianity. . . . The way was thus opened for the inclusion of the Gentiles,” in R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple: The Church in the New Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 88.

<sup>94</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 61–67.

<sup>95</sup> I. Howard Marshall, “Church and Temple in the New Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 40:2 (1989): 219.

<sup>96</sup> For example, see Jack Hayford, “How God Evaluates Worship,” *Leadership Journal* 20:1 (April 1, 1999): 24–31; John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg:



understand that phrase. The context of this passage contains no references or allusions to the topic of Christian meetings. However, modern readers might mistakenly assume that the passage deals with “church worship” because (1) modern churches routinely describe their meetings as “worship,” and (2) modern English versions translate προσκυνέω in this verse as “worship.” But as the LXX and NT reveal, these two premises are flawed. The NT does not describe Christian meetings as “worship.” And, as noted in this section, προσκυνέω does not refer to singing or praying or performing liturgy in any of its 265 occurrences in the LXX and NT. John 4:20–24 is discussing an individual’s obligation to perform proskynesis before God in a temple. But in the NT, Christians do not have temple buildings or holy places.

It is noteworthy that Jesus’s point about προσκυνέω in spirit and truth is not mentioned anywhere else in the NT. It appears that the NT writers perceived no significant teaching here about προσκυνέω or prostration. However, Jesus’s radical statements about the irrelevance of the temple reverberate throughout the NT. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each devote a significant section to the destruction of the temple.<sup>97</sup> Acts, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation all contain similar revolutionary concepts about the temple.<sup>98</sup> When early church fathers reflect on John 4:20–24, they commonly recognize that the primary issue is “place” not “prostration” (προσκυνέω). For example, Origen (ca. AD 230) says, “To this opinion of the Samaritan

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Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1996). Both of these sources treat “worship in spirit and truth” as a widely accepted biblical principle for Christian assemblies.

<sup>97</sup> Matt 24:1–51, Mark 13:1–37, Luke 21:10–38.

<sup>98</sup> For revolutionary statements about the temple, see Acts 7:48–50; 17:24–25 (cf. Acts 21:28); 1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19–20; 2 Cor 5:1–5; 6:16; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:4–10; Heb 10:1–25; Rev 3:12; 11:2; 11:19; 21:1–4, 10–14, 22.

woman, ... the Savior answered that he who would follow the Lord must lay aside all preference for particular places.”<sup>99</sup> Hilary of Poitiers (ca. AD 350) says, “The prejudices of both (Jews and Samaritans) confined the all-embracing and illimitable God to the crest of a hill or the vault of a building. ... For Spirit cannot be cabined or confined; it is omnipresent in space and time, and under all conditions present in its fullness.”<sup>100</sup> The enduring message of John 4:24 is that holy places will soon become obsolete and irrelevant.

Is Jesus saying that prostration to God will soon become irrelevant? Greeven has noted the “astonishing fact” that προσκυνέω virtually disappears from Christian paraenesis after the Gospels and Acts.<sup>101</sup> The term appears thirty times in the Gospels and is then found only four times in Acts, where it never describes Christian activity.<sup>102</sup> Later, it is found twenty-four times in Revelation. But in all the epistles prior to Revelation, the word is found only three times: twice in OT quotations in Hebrews (1:6 and 11:21) and once in 1 Cor 14:25. Greeven concludes: “Proskynesis demands visible majesty before which the worshipper bows. The Son of God was visible to all on earth (the Gospels), and the exalted Lord will again be visible to His own when faith gives way to sight

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<sup>99</sup> *On First Principles*, 1.1.4–5.

<sup>100</sup> *On the Trinity*, 2.31. See similar statements by Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. AD 400) and Cyril of Alexandria (ca. AD 425) in Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 1–10*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 155, 158.

<sup>101</sup> Greeven, “προσκυνέω,” *TDNT*, 6:765. There may be other reasons for the relative disappearance of proskynesis in the Epistles, but Greeven asserts that the gesture essentially loses its significance in a world where God is no longer physically present, whether in the temple or in Jesus.

<sup>102</sup> One of the four is Acts 24:11, where Paul notes that he had recently gone up to Jerusalem to perform proskynesis (προσκυνήσων) at the temple, in an attempt to show solidarity with Jewish customs (cf. Acts 21:20–26).

(Revelation).”<sup>103</sup> In the NT epistles, with the newfound insignificance of the physical dwelling place of God, and with the newfound abode of God within the hearts of His people,<sup>104</sup> the religious ritual of prostration has lost its venue.<sup>105</sup> Ironically, 1 Cor 14:25 presents the only time when προσκυνέω is used in the context of a Christian assembly. But it is not a Christian who performs the act, and the act is not “worship” in the modern sense. It is an unbeliever who falls (πεσὼν) on his face (ἐπὶ πρόσωπον) and prostrates (προσκυνήσει) to God (τῷ θεῷ). This God does not dwell in a sacred building. Rather, He is “certainly among you” (ὄντως ὁ θεὸς ἐν ὑμῖν ἐστίν), dwelling within God’s people through His Spirit.

#### Summary and Conclusion

Of all the Greek words that are occasionally translated as “worship,” προσκυνέω is the one most likely to be so translated. This analysis, which has examined the 204 times the word is found in the Septuagint and its 61 occurrences in the NT, has found that the word retains its core sense of prostration wherever it is found.<sup>106</sup> Even though “worship” is a common translation for προσκυνέω, it is not a viable translation because it conjures inaccurate, vague, and anachronistic images in the minds of modern English readers. The LXX and the NT give no indication that προσκυνέω connotes singing, praying, attending religious services, or the conducting of liturgy. Rather, the idea of prostration continually clings to προσκυνέω, to its OT Hebrew counterpart, הִשָּׁתַּחוּ, and to its ancient Latin

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<sup>103</sup> Greeven, “προσκυνέω,” *TDNT*, 6:765.

<sup>104</sup> Jer 31:31–34; Matt 1:23; Acts 2:38; Rom 8:9–11; 1 Cor 3:16; et al.

<sup>105</sup> See Peter’s response to Cornelius’s prostration in Acts 10:25 (“Stand up; I too am *just* a man”) and the angel’s response to John’s prostration in Rev 19:10 and 22:8–9 (“Do not do that”).

<sup>106</sup> The one exception is a metaphorical use of the term in 4 Macc 5:12.

counterpart, *adorare*. The act of prostration is a form of greeting, whether performed to humans on a road or to deity in a temple. The word has a distinct directional component, activated by its prefix (προσ-) and its common use with the dative case, indicating that prostration is performed “toward” an honored one. Frequently, in the LXX and the NT, the context surrounding προσκυνέω includes several terms that indicate prostration (i.e., prostration indicators), such “falling down,” “stooping,” being “on the ground,” on one’s “knees” or “face,” at the “feet” of the one so honored by the act. These terms are frequent, and they make clear that the word connotes prostration. Even in the few verses where the context contains no additional explanatory terms, the idea of prostration still fits the context. In John 4:24, the classic verse about performing προσκυνέω “in spirit and truth,” προσκυνέω should be understood as another routine reference to performing prostration in the temple, a meaning made clear in more than twenty other temple contexts in the LXX and NT.

Why does the NT never use προσκυνέω to describe what Christians do in assembly? The answer is that προσκυνέω indicates prostration, and the NT reveals no reason to mandate that Christians perform proskynesis in their meetings. In the NT, a Christian meeting place is not viewed as a “temple” or “the house of God.” Christians have no sacred places, and the place of their meetings has no sacral significance. Rather, the NT teaches that God now dwells within each Christian’s body (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19) and within the body of believers (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21) through the Spirit. At the end of Revelation, as the loud voice announces from the throne, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them” (Rev 21:3). Since God is now “with us” (μεθ’ ἡμῶν ὁ θεός,

Matt 1:23) and is in all places (John 4:20–24), the necessity of one’s prostration to God is essentially irrelevant until one appears in-person before the very throne of God.