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## Trivializing the Holy

### *Current Trends in Worship and Isaiah 1:10–17*

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R. Mark Shipp

Worship is holy meeting. In worship, man enters into the sphere of holiness, into the presence of the Holy One.... In her worship she remembers God's self-witness, "I, the Lord, am holy," and to it she responds ..., "The Lord our God is holy" ... In the cult, Israel remembers the holy past, and in the spoken recital it becomes present....

James Muilenburg

In the contemporary movement to revitalize worship, two general trends are discernible: first, there is a trend to recover traditional worship styles and second, a trend to deny the relevance and vitality of traditional modes of worship in favor of those which are more immediately appealing to the outsider. Curiously, there has been little concomitant interest in recovering a biblical understanding of worship!

These comments focus on the theology of worship in the Old Testament, with particular reference to Isaiah chapter one. If the church is to recover a biblical theology of worship, it must reflect Old Testament concepts of God's presence and holiness and Israel's response to that holiness. The God of Sinai and Zion is also the God of Golgotha and has always required his people to worship him in spirit and in truth. I will, therefore, seek to explore the theology of worship from the perspective of Isaiah 1. It is my hope that this approach will shed light on what we do in church today and the attitudes we bring to worship in a time of changing styles and preferences. Those worship practices and attitudes should be fundamentally informed by scripture, not merely taste or tradition.

<sup>1</sup> On the theology of worship in the Old Testament, see A. S. Herbert, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959); H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel: its Forms and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); and James Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel: Biblical Faith and Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961) 107–127 are among the few monographs or sections of monographs dedicated to this subject. Most recently, *Ex Auditu* journal vol. 8 (1992) has dedicated the entire issue to a theological understanding of worship in the Bible.

## The Vocabulary of Worship in Isaiah 1:10-17

Isaiah mentions all five kinds of offering practiced at the temple in Jerusalem. The "sacrifices" (v. 11) may refer to animal sacrifices in general; more often the word is used of the sacrifices that an individual would present (fellowship, sin, and guilt), which were intended to *bring about the restoration of broken fellowship* between individuals, and between individuals and God, or to celebrate such a restoration? The purpose of the "burnt offering" (v. 11) was to *make atonement for the sins* of all Israel so that the "Holy One of Israel" might continue to dwell in the midst of his people? The "offerings" (v. 13; better translated, "grain offerings") were an *expression of thanksgiving* for the lord's blessing of agricultural bounty.<sup>4</sup> One of the major functions of the "incense" (v. 13) was to cover the ark of the covenant with smoke during the priest's entry into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16); in two biblical texts, it *represents the prayers of the people of God* (Psalm 141:2; Rev. 8:1-4), which Isaiah mentions specifically in v. 15.

Other words in this passage also refer to worship. The first of these we encounter in v. 11: "When you come to appear before me . . ." The words "to appear before me" in Hebrew literally mean "to be seen by my face."<sup>5</sup> "To see the face of God" is typical terminology in the Old Testament for coming to the temple in Jerusalem to worship (see, for example, Ps. 42:2). Another term which also has worship connotations is the term "abomination." This word almost invariably refers to idol worship in Old Testament narrative literature, but has a wider range of meaning in the prophetic literature. Here, especially in Ezekiel, it refers to abominable practices involving transgression of covenant law involving more than idolatry. It is difficult to determine whether Isaiah is referring strictly to idol worship (and therefore the "incense is an abomination" would refer to incense offered to foreign

<sup>2</sup> The sacrifice mentioned here is probably to be equated with the "well-being" (also translated "peace") or "fellowship offering," although it is also the generic word for sacrifice or slaughter. Out of 33 occurrences of the term in the book of Leviticus, 30 are related to the fellowship offering and only three are clearly the generic "animal sacrifice" (Lev. 17:8, 17:9, and 23:37). These generic occurrences are telling: in both contexts they refer to animal sacrifice *in distinction to the whole burnt offering and grain offering*. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that all individual sacrifices of animals, including fellowship offerings and the two kinds of sacrifice not mentioned in Isaiah one are subsumed in Isaiah under the category of "animal sacrifice, not totally consumed on the altar." These latter two, the sin offering (for those guilty of inadvertent transgression), and the guilt offering (for those guilty of intentional transgression), along with the fellowship offering, were instigated primarily by individual Israelites on a voluntary basis.

<sup>3</sup> In the whole burnt offering, performed twice daily on behalf of the entire people of Israel by the priests, but particularly on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), the entire animal was consumed, leaving nothing for the sustenance of the priests or the people, as a complete gift offered up to God.

<sup>4</sup> There are other occurrences of this word which have a more general meaning: "gifts," or offerings, of either the field or the flock (note Gen. 4:3). It was not only a specific category of sacrifice as presented in Leviticus 2, which could be offered on its own, but could also be given along with the fellowship offering (Lev. 7:12-15) as an expression of thankfulness, or as a substitute for the sin offering (Lev. 5:11). Its primary sense, however, is that of *thankful return to the Lord for his bounty*.

<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have suggested that "to appear" instead of "to see the face of God" is a scribal alteration of the phrase "to see my face" so as not to leave the impression that one may literally see the face of God and live.

gods as in Ezekiel 8: 11), or to the broader meaning of "abominable behavior." In other words, Isaiah is either saying, "Your worship is tantamount to idol worship," or "Your worship is tantamount to immorality."<sup>6</sup>

One final phrase, "wash yourselves, make yourselves clean," also has worship connotations.<sup>7</sup> To Isaiah, the entire people of Israel require cleansing, leaders and commoners alike (vv. 10, 15–16). This is because their "hands are full of blood." Somehow, the oppression of the widow and the orphan, the disregard for the neighbor, and the despising of the Holy One invalidate the worship being rendered to God in Isaiah chapter one. Their attitude towards God and neighbor make them as surely unclean (or, unsuitable to participate in worship) as if they had contact with blood or with a dead body.<sup>8</sup> Water was also used for the ritual cleansing of those who had contact with blood (Lev. 15:25–30) or bodily discharges (Lev. 15). Those in Isaiah's day who trampled the courts of the Lord with their multitudes of sacrifices yet disregarded their neighbor and the holy nature of God were like those who had defiled themselves with contact with blood or dead bodies: they were equally unclean and unsuitable to come before the Lord with their offerings. Isaiah 4:3–4 describe the plan of God regarding the unholy inhabitants of Jerusalem: their filth will be washed and their blood will be cleansed, and "he who is left in Zion will be called holy."

Isaiah is condemning Judah's expression of worship across the boards: the voluntary sacrifices for intentional and unintentional sin, the sacrifice and the eating of a fellowship meal, the offering of the whole burnt offering on behalf of the entire nation, contributions in the form of thanksgiving offerings, cultic prayer, and the various festivals and holy days on which "all Israel" recited the great deeds of God in their past, offered songs<sup>9</sup> and prayers, and recommitted themselves to the covenant.

It is not difficult to see in the various forms of worship practiced at the temple in Isaiah's day analogies with worship in the church today. We meet for worship at prescribed times and places as they did and rehearse God's deeds on our behalf, which constitute us as a people no less than it did the ancient Israelites. We offer corporate prayer as they did. We meet for fellowship meals and celebrate an atoning sacrifice as they did. We give freewill offerings of thanksgiving for God's bountiful gifts as they did.

<sup>6</sup> In the first case, Isaiah would be comparing the "pious" offering of incense to idol worship. In the second, the comparison would be between incense offering and immoral behavior.

<sup>7</sup> Out of 33 occurrences of the word "wash" in the Old Testament, the vast majority deal with ritual cleansing (20 in Leviticus alone).

<sup>8</sup> See particularly in this regard ritual cleansing required in the Pentateuch. "The water for impurity, for the removal of sin" (Num. 19:9) was to be used for washing when someone had contact with a dead body (Num. 19:11–22).

<sup>9</sup> Worship in song, a large part of cultic worship in Israel throughout the pre- and post-exilic periods, is not specifically mentioned in Isaiah 1. The gatherings of Israelites at the temple on Sabbaths and festivals would, however, have certainly included such singing, as the large number of liturgical notations in the Psalter attest.

This is not to diminish the differences which exist between their worship and ours. It is to make the claim that the church's worship has its roots in the ancient Israelite acts of praise, contrition, confession, thanksgiving, and, above all, the recognition that the Holy One of Israel is present in our midst as He was in Israel's. This aspect of worship is today no different than it was for Israel. Worship has always been both the celebration of God's salvation and our recognition of unholiness in the face of the consuming fire of his holiness (Hebrews 12). The motivations for worship remain the recognition of sin, praise for who God is and what He has done, and incorporation into the fellowship of his people.

### The Kind of Worship Isaiah Condemns

It must first be said that Isaiah does not condemn formal worship *per se*, as some older commentators have suggested. He is condemning a specific *manner* of worship: worship which is combined with oppression, iniquity with solemn assembly. Individual worship acts are not condemned, nor is the method of performing these acts either too innovative or not innovative enough. As we have seen, Isaiah mentions most Israelite worship practices, at least insofar as these are revealed to us in the Old Testament. The people were going about their business worshipping in the temple via the traditional modes. Indeed, the people of Judah are worshipping frequently and *en masse*: they are offering multitudes of sacrifices (v. 11) and their church attendance is characterized as "trampling the courts" of the Lord (v. 12). To an outward observer these are a very religious people who are well-versed in religious pageantry.

Nor should we suppose that Isaiah is condemning the Israelites because their worship had become "stuck in a rut." Isaiah does not suggest that the old forms of worship have become petrified with time and what they really need is to change the way worship is conducted to make it somehow more meaningful and relevant. The superficial worship Isaiah describes is not superficial because the people are going through meaningless ritual. Because Isaiah mentions most forms of worship practiced throughout Israelite history (sacrifice, prayer, festivals, convocations), which are never condemned as such, one can only assume that temple worship is being carried out in a careful and salutary manner and in the traditional modes. Isaiah says "wash yourselves," not "wash yourselves from ritual."

What is it about their worship which evokes such a vitriolic response from Isaiah? Why the comparison of such religious people with the "rulers of Sodom" and the "people of Gomorrah"? In the context of this passage I would like to suggest that it is for two reasons: first, they have "despised the Holy One of Israel" (v. 4) by not acknowledging his presence in their midst, and second, they have oppressed or ignored their fellows who were least capable of response and most in need. Sodom and Gomorrah were not known for either their holy lifestyle or their brotherly concern.

Here, it appears that the comparison with Sodom and Gomorrah has not so much to do with idolatry or flagrantly immoral lifestyles on the part of Judah as much as with the people's trivializing the presence of the Holy God and disregarding their covenant obligation to their brother.

### Trivializing the Holy

The purpose of worship in Israel was to praise God for His acts in creation and redemption, mostly celebrated and rehearsed at the annual festivals, and to offer the various sacrifices which allowed Israel to live in the presence of a holy God. An interesting passage in Ezekiel 45: 15–17 says that *all* the sacrifices conducted in Israel were to “make atonement for the house of Israel.” All contributed to the “disposal of impurity” and made it possible for Israelites to live with God and each other in holiness.<sup>10</sup> The primary pre-condition for worship in ancient Israel was the recognition of the presence of impurity and unholiness, requiring atoning sacrifices in order to restore a holy relationship with both God and one's fellow. But impurity is only recognized where there is an absolute standard of purity beside which it is compared. God's holy presence in the midst of the camp of Israel in the wilderness and his “dwelling” in the midst of Israel in the temple should have brought about a response of awe and the recognition of sin. Israel was unsuited for worship and unprepared to be in fellowship with the Holy without first recognizing the reality of sin and the incongruity of “iniquity with solemn assembly.”

The people of Isaiah's day had forgotten the reality of the divine presence in the midst of Israel. The offering of the entire catalog of sacrifices, the giving of prayers, and the rehearsal of Israel's past in the celebration of God's deliverance from Egypt, sustenance in the wilderness, and continued prosperity in the land continued unabated. But they seem to have missed the whole point of their sacrifices and celebrations. By failing to understand that the “Holy One of Israel” was present in their worship and daily lives they trivialized the holy. Their worship was tantamount to those who came before the Lord in their impurity, without recognition of their sin and need for cleansing.

Just as Israel over-emphasized worship rituals, so we may be equally guilty of trivializing the holy by de-emphasizing the role of tradition. This has to do with the peculiarly American assumption that change is good, while what is old or traditional is almost by definition obsolete or bad.

“Novelty,” on the other hand, was never a virtue in Israel or anywhere in the ancient Near East. Worship practices and political and social institutions were

<sup>10</sup> David Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity* (SBL Dissertation Series 101; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987).



especially related to the actions of God in the beginning!<sup>11</sup> The worship practices described in Isaiah derive their authority from Moses himself. There are two implications here: first, that worship practices are part and parcel of the very inception of a tradition, and second, that it is possible to be faithful to the traditional practice while being unfaithful to its underlying motivation.

It is not only the motivations for worship, but also the forms that worship takes, which must be in continuity with the original tradition. All worship practices, including all “innovations,” ought to be evaluated in terms of their coherence with biblical teaching and apostolic faith. In our modern American fascination with change for change’s sake, we may at times be guilty of the opposite problem which Isaiah decries: we at times have tried to dispense with the traditional forms of worship, something which would not have occurred to Isaiah or his audience.

### Lack of Concern for the Neighbor

Where there is no sense of God’s holy presence and recognition of impurity and need for cleansing, there is also the disregard for the needs of the brother or sister. The Judeans had missed the whole point of worship: the giving of thanksgiving and praise to God for who He is and what He has done and the realization of the reality and need of their neighbors. Worship tendered to God must include the elements of atonement for sin and praise for God’s redemption and presence on the one hand and the renewal of fellowship with our brothers and sisters on the other. There was no redemption of solitary Israelites from Egypt. All the Israelites were redeemed so that they might *worship God* and that He might *constitute them a people for His own possession*. For Judah to trivialize God’s holy presence and ignore the needs of their fellow Israelites was to miss the entire point of worship.

<sup>11</sup> The giving of the rite of circumcision to Abraham (Gen. 17), the Torah, or law, given on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19–24), and the establishment of priestly and Levitical procedures (Leviticus, I Chr. 23–29) are all presented as having their inception with major figures in Israel’s past. Cultic practices and laws—which could be amended and updated through the course of time, as the differences between Exodus 20–24 and Deuteronomy 5–6, 12–26 attest—always derived their continuing authority and relevance from the original tradition. Practices which were not so grounded in the ethos, confession, and cultic procedures of the original traditions were not tolerated (cf. Lev. 10:1–3, Num. 16, etc.). Note especially the passion with which the books of Chronicles ground the worship of the post-exilic period (post 539 BC) in David, the first king reigning in Jerusalem—the city of the temple—and not just in the pre-exilic period or even Solomon. Outside of Israel the requirement that the cult be based in creation or a significant intrusion of the gods into human affairs is virtually self-evident and too well-represented to document. It is sufficient to give a single example. In the *Enuma Elish*, the sacred creation story of the Babylonians, the temple in Babylon and its worship are established at the creation of the world and enjoy all the authority and prestige of antiquity and divine election.

### Conclusion

Like Israel, we may trivialize the holy by failing to recognize that the Holy One is present in our worship; a particular temptation today is to introduce novelties in worship that have no basis in the Christian tradition. We may also trivialize the holy by failing to perceive the ethical implications of our worship.

Worship in Israel was not primarily intended to attract the outsider, but Israelite worship offered to God was often attractive to outsiders.<sup>12</sup> There is no concern in the Old Testament for either "making worship relevant," so that individual tastes and preferences might be satisfied, or for merely maintaining familiar rituals without alteration. The tradition of Israel was *living* tradition, but nonetheless it was an *authoritative* tradition; there was no place for innovation or novelty *per se* which was not in fundamental continuity with the past. Changes in Israelite worship were made in continuity with the tradition of the past in order to be faithful to that tradition.<sup>13</sup>

What, then, is the point of it all? Isaiah's concern is that in her corporate worship Israel might recognize the presence of the Holy One and her neighbor's need. No act of sacrifice or festival gathering in the Old Testament was an end in itself. All were intended to bring to Israel the awareness of God's demands for holiness and his holy nature, as well as the need for concrete acts of kindness and covenant faithfulness to fellow Israelites. But they often became ends in themselves, whether in Israel's attempts to "be like the nations" or in the repetition of comfortable traditions. True worship, whether in Israel or the church, has always been "an offering greater than all sacrifices that is pleasing to God, the spontaneous outburst of the heart in gratitude and adoration and praise."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, true worship must possess the moral dimension of concern for the neighbor in need.

Neither in Israel nor in the church is "iniquity with solemn assembly" condoned.

What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Religion that is pure and undefiled is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27).

<sup>12</sup> See Isaiah 2:2-3, 56:6-8. "God-fearers," those Gentiles in the New Testament who were attracted to Judaism but were not proselytes, also come to mind (see Luke 7:1-5).

<sup>13</sup> Examples of the "updating" of Israelite worship practices are numerous. The three annual festivals, as I mentioned above, were originally agricultural festivals but became associated with the exodus, Passover, and wilderness wanderings.

<sup>14</sup> Mulenberg, *Way*, 116.

The worship God wants has always been the sacrifice of ourselves in willing obedience to Him. This, the only true offering in worship, involves the recognition of God's holy presence, our own need for cleansing, and concrete acts of compassion:

Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?...Then you shall call and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help, and He will say, "Here I am" (Is. 58:6, 9).

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