

SHOULD JESUS BE WORSHIPED?

A Practical Conundrum Facing
Those Who Believe Only the Father is God

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Introduction

I grew up in a tradition that subscribed to a reactionary Christology. Our opposition to the juggernaut of evangelical trinitarianism defined us. Unfortunately, the byproduct of theology by anti-association resulted in an unnecessarily low Christology. In the past, singing songs to Jesus was prohibited because he cannot hear us. Worship of Jesus was out of the question because that would be outright idolatry (worshiping one who is not God). I used to believe that Jesus' heavenly ministry was limited to sitting at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 8.1). However, I have come to realize that he is much more involved in life here on earth. He baptizes new Christians with holy spirit (Matthew 3.11; Acts 2.33), intercedes on our behalf (Hebrews 7.25), is present within us (John 14.23; Colossians 1.27), is still in the healing business (Acts 9.34), coordinates the church as its head (Ephesians 4.15-16; Colossians 1.18), knows our deeds (Revelation 2.2, 19; 3.1, 8, 15), and even knows our thoughts (Revelation 2.23). Furthermore, Jesus has been exalted to the highest position in the universe (Ephesians 1.20-23). Yet, he is still a man (1 Timothy 2.5). He is not an angel, and he is not God. It is my intention in this paper to examine the question: "Should Jesus be worshiped, and if so, how?"

Before I can delve into the conundrum facing unitarians today, the stage must be set with the paradox that provokes such a question. Jesus was a strict monotheist who championed the Jewish Creed known as the Shema (Deuteronomy 6.4; Mark 12.29). He would not allow himself to even be called "good" (Mark 10.18). He said to Satan, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only" (Matthew 4.10). But there is a tension present within the Scriptures. In fact, Jesus is regularly worshiped in the Gospels (Matthew 2.2, 8, 11; 14.33; 15.25; 18.26; 28.9, 17; Luke 24.52; John 9.38). He has been glorified to a very high standing, even above the angels (Philippians 2.9; Hebrews 1.4). The Bible concludes with John's vision of twenty-four elders and four living creatures falling down before the lamb followed by thousands of angels shouting, "Worthy is the lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing...to him who sits on the throne, and to the lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever" (Revelation 5.12, 13b). Certainly, a tension is present that yearns for resolution. The conclusion of the matter of Jesus worship must be comprehensive enough to embrace all of these texts and harmonize them without compromising their integrity.

Some Questions That Need Answers

What is worship? Is it true that modern worship is limited to singing songs to God/Jesus? Who in the Bible was worshiped? Can one who is not God be worshiped? Isn't that idolatry? Can I worship the Father with everything and then have anything left to worship someone else? The beauty of the belief that only the Father is God is that it is single hearted. I can devote myself fully to one person. After all, Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6.24). How can I honestly fixate upon the one God with all of my heart, mind, soul, and strength if I am also obliged to worship another? What would Jesus do? Who would he worship? How would he worship? What would he say if someone wanted to worship him today? Isn't the inevitable result of a strict monotheistic faith strict monotheistic worship? These questions and many others need to be answered by the Socinian community of our time. The orthodox community has no need to raise these questions because their doctrine of God does not require an inspection into this subject. Thus, we go it alone—a quest to determine biblical worship and what it means to the modern monotheist.

Defining Terms

WORSHIP ¹	
1.	Homage or service to a deity
2.	Adoration; devotion
3.	form of address for certain magistrates

The **modern use** of the word “worship” includes within it the limitation that it is exclusively performed to a deity. This is most likely a result of two factors: (1) the mutation of the word “God” from a title to a name (2) the fact that the three largest religions in the western world (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) claim to be monotheistic.

(1) The biblical definition of the word “God” is one who is in the role of God to others or one who is mighty. In fact, humans were called “gods” on several occasions (Genesis 23.6; Exodus 4.16; 7.1; 21.6; 22.8-9; 1 Samuel 2.25; Psalm 8.5; 45.1, 6; 82.1-2, 6-7). Furthermore, the word “God” (אלהים) can even be used as an adjective (Genesis 30.8; Exodus 9.28; 1 Samuel 14.15; Jonah 3.3). Additionally, the New Testament uses the word “God” in similar ways but not nearly as much (John 10.35; 2 Corinthians 4.3-4). However, the flexibility of this word has all but disappeared today. In modern times, “God” is the name of the being who created everything. This mutation of definition, if unnoticed, places a colored lens over the Scriptures that can distort the reading of critical texts (John 1.18; 20.21; Hebrews 1.8; etc.).

(2) Since the three massively popular religions that color American culture are monotheistic, worship is also monotheistic. That is to say, that worship is done to God only. Thus, if you are worshiping Jesus then he must be God (however that works out). One can simply not worship one who is not God without being called a heretic or idolater. Even so, the biblical understanding of worship is much more flexible.

Old Testament Worship

The Old Testament word for “worship” is *shachah* (שָׁחָה); “a primitive root; to depress, i.e. prostrate (especially reflexive, in homage to royalty or God):--bow (self) down, crouch, fall down (flat), humbly beseech, do (make) obeisance, do reverence, make to stoop, worship.”²

This is how *shachah* is translated in the NASB³

bow	5	bowing	1	prostrate	2
bow ourselves down	1	bowing down	1	prostrated	13
bow yourselves down	1	bows down	1	prostrating	1
bow down	21	did homage	1	weighs it down	1
bowed	16	down in homage	1	worship	47
bowed in worship	1	homage	1	worshiped	31
bowed themselves down	2	lie down	1	worshiping	3
bowed down	14	paid homage	3	worships	2

¹ The American Century Dictionary page 667

² Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon #07812

³ New American Standard Hebrew Lexicon #07812

The Broad use of שָׁחָה

There are two ways in which the word “worship” is used in the Tanakh: general worship and religious worship. “Adoration proper was expressed by prostration to the ground, or even by lying prone with the face touching the ground (Genesis 17.3; Joshua 5.14; Job 1.20; Psalm 95.6; 99.5; Daniel 3.5). As elsewhere, this posture was not at first confined to intercourse with God. As an act of special courtesy, it was adopted towards kings (2 Samuel 14.4), towards strangers of mysterious quality (Genesis 18.2), as an expression of close and respectful attachment (1 Samuel 20.41), or with the design to conciliate (Genesis 33.3; 1 Samuel 25.23; Esther 8.3; Matthew 18.26), or to honor (2 Kings 4.37).”⁴ General worship could be done to anyone, while religious worship is only allotted to deity. However, the same word *shacha* is used for both. It is up to the translators to determine which it is and select the appropriate English word. For example, when Abraham spoke to the sons of Heth concerning a burial place for his wife, Sarah, “he bowed [*shacha*] to the people of the land”. This could just as easily be translated “worshiped,” but it was obvious to the translators that Abraham was not performing the act to a deity. Nevertheless, what happens when one’s understanding of who is deity differs from the translators?

Some examples of general worship—homage paid to someone other than God—are listed below. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is a sampling.

Genesis 18.2	Abraham worshiped three foreigners (angels)
Genesis 33.3	Jacob worshiped Esau to gain his favor
Genesis 49.8	Jacob’s children will worship Judah in submission
1 Samuel 25.23	Abigail worshiped David in desperation
2 Samuel 14.2	Woman of Tekoah worshiped the king in grief
1 Kings 1.31	Bathsheba worshiped David in gratitude
2 Kings 4.32	The Shunammite worshiped Elisha in gratitude
Esther 8.3	Esther worshiped Ahasuerus out of respect

The Narrow use of שָׁחָה

The Torah is unwavering in its sole subscription to strict monotheistic worship. The most cherished creed of the Jewish people declares without hesitation or apology, “Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!” (Deuteronomy 6.4). This theme repeats throughout the book of Deuteronomy (4.35, 39; 7.9; 10.17-18, 20-21; 32.12, 39; etc.). The inevitable consequence of a strict monotheistic faith is strict monotheistic worship. Although the word “worship” is flexible, the particular kind of worship done to God (religious worship) is exclusive. Consider the texts below that explain that worship/service is to be done to Yahweh alone:

Deuteronomy 6.13 You shall fear only Yahweh your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name

Deuteronomy 10.12 Now, Israel, what does Yahweh your God require from You, but to fear Yahweh your God, to walk in His ways and love Him, and to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul

Deuteronomy 10.20 You shall fear Yahweh your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name.

⁴ Hastings Dictionary page 14.

Deuteronomy 11.13 It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love Yahweh your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul...

Deuteronomy 13.4 You shall follow Yahweh your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.

Yahweh is the one to whom the people must cling. If one finger lets loose of Yahweh to grasp for another god, then they are no longer clinging to Him. He wants to be worshiped with all the heart and all the soul—everything. If one worships with everything, there is nothing left for anyone else.

Yahweh is a jealous God. He does not want to share His worship with anyone or anything else. “No injury to God compares with the denial of His uniqueness and the transfer to another of the recognition due to Him. In this light must be understood His references to Himself as a jealous God (Exodus 20.5).⁵” Consider the following texts that demonstrate the forcefulness with which Yahweh demands single-hearted loyalty.

Exodus 20.5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, Yahweh your God, am a **jealous God**...

Exodus 34.14 For you shall not worship any other god, for Yahweh, whose name is **Jealous**, is a **jealous God**

Deuteronomy 4.23-24 So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of Yahweh your God which He made with you, and make yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which Yahweh your God has commanded you. For Yahweh your God is a consuming fire, a **jealous God**.

Deuteronomy 5.9 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, Yahweh your God, am a **jealous God**...

Deuteronomy 6.14-15 You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you, for Yahweh your God in the midst of you is a **jealous God**; otherwise the anger of Yahweh your God will be kindled against you, and He will wipe you off the face of the earth.

This is no small matter to God. He says that He will wipe them off the face of the earth if they follow other gods. This is not a suggestion. This is a commandment with distinct consequences for disobedience. Out of the twenty-seven texts in Deuteronomy involving worship/service, twenty-one command the people not to worship other gods (Deuteronomy 4.19, 28; 5.9; 7.4, 16; 8.19; 11.16; 12.2, 30; 13.2, 6, 13; 17.3; 28.14, 36, 47, 64; 29.18, 26; 30.17; 31.20).

The evidence from the Torah is overwhelming. Yahweh is God. He is to be worshiped whole-heartedly. The rest of the Old Testament confirms this simple monotheistic service to Yahweh. Even so, many hypothesize that Jesus changed everything. It is to this proposition that we will now turn.

New Testament Worship

The chief word for worship in the New Testament is *proskuneo* (προσκυνεω) “meaning to kiss, like a dog licking his master's hand; to fawn or crouch to, i.e. (literally or figuratively) prostrate oneself in homage (do reverence to, adore).⁶” In the KJV *proskuneo* is translated worship each of the sixty times it appears in the NT. However, in the NASB there are some changes made to accommodate the more modern definition of worship as only to deity.

⁵ Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology page 561.

⁶ Strong's Greek Lexicon #4352

This is how *proskuneo* is translated in the NASB⁷

bow down	1	prostrated himself before	1
bow down before	1	worship	32
bowed down	1	worshiped	17
bowed down before	2	worshippers	1
bowing before	1	worshiping	1
bowing down	1	worships	1

The Broad use of προσκυνεω

The New Testament, although written in Greek, is still a Jewish document (written almost exclusively by Jews). Here as in the OT are found references to general worship. For example, when the magi came to Herod with news that the King of the Jews had been born, he deceitfully asked them to report the new king's location so that he could "worship" him. The only information that Herod was aware of was that this child was to be the King of the Jews, the long awaited Messiah. It is in this context that Herod feigned that he would prostrate himself to Jesus. Confessing Jesus as God or worshiping as such was not a thought in Herod's mind.

Furthermore, the Philadelphians are promised that those who are of the synagogue of Satan will be made to "worship" at their feet. This is not to say that Philadelphians are not humans or that the reference is to an angel. Either of these two possibilities is ruled out by the immediate context. Consider the texts below in which the broad sense of *proskuneo* is used.

Matthew 2.8	Herod supposedly wants to worship Jesus as the King of the Jews
Matthew 15.25	Gentile woman worships Jesus begging for healing
Matthew 18.26	In parable, forgiven servant worships his master
Mark 15.19	Jesus mocked by Roman soldiers worshiping him as King of the Jews
Revelation 3.9	Disobedient are forced to worship saints

The Narrow use of προσκυνεω

The Bible does not cease to believe that only Yahweh is God once the page labeled "The New Testament" is turned. In fact, the believers in the NT confirm and support the ancient Shema. When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment (Mark 12.28-30), he could not help but start at Deuteronomy 6.4 as a lead-in to the next verse. This is proof that he accepted and confirmed the Shema without question or hesitation. Did God stop being jealous once Jesus was born?

A text that clarifies who we are to worship can be found in the letter to the Corinthians. "Yet for us there is *but* one God, the Father, **from** whom are all things and we *exist for* Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ **through** whom are all things, and we *exist through* him" (1 Corinthians 8:6). The Father, God, created all things. He is the source from which everything, including Jesus, originated. He is the one God, and we are able to

⁷ New American Standard Hebrew Lexicon #4352

come and worship Him through the one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Father made everything, and we experience all things through Christ. The Lord Jesus is eminently important—he is the highest exalted person in the universe next to God. Yet, he himself confessed that the Father was his God. “Jesus said to her, ‘Stop clinging to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God’” (John 20:17).

Jesus once discussed this subject with a Samaritan lady. He had been traveling for a long while and was wearied from the journey, so he rested by the well. As he relaxed, a woman came up to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink, and a conversation began during which the topic of worship arose. The Samaritans believed that they should worship God on Mount Gerizim, while the Jews believed that they should worship in Jerusalem. The woman asked about this because she considered Jesus to be a prophet and because she sincerely wanted to understand why there was such a difference between the two.

John 4:21-24 Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

Three times Jesus stated that worship is to be done to the Father. Then in the last sentence, he equated the Father to God. In Jesus’ mind, they were the same. Repeatedly in the Old Testament, religious worship was only to be done to God (Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Deuteronomy 6:13; 8:19; 10:20; 11:16; 13:4; 26:10; Joshua 24:14; 1 Samuel 7:3; Psalm 99:5, 9). Jesus did not change that, but instead brought the worship of Yahweh to the next level.

Furthermore, he explains that God is spirit. “Primarily it here indicates that God is not corporeal [physical or material], and therefore needs no temple.”⁸ Jesus is making a categorical statement about God’s substance in order to answer the question about where He should be worshiped. God can be worshiped anywhere because He is not limited to being in one place at a time as all men are. That is to say, location does not matter; truth does. It is very important for us to understand whom to worship. Jesus said, “The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”

One of Satan’s goals is to divert the worship of Yahweh to himself. He endeavored to do this when he tempted Jesus in the beginning of his ministry. The third temptation (according to Matthew 4) was to give Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory...if you fall down and worship me [the Devil].” Satan was offering Jesus a shortcut to the kingdom. He was willing to fulfill Jesus’ destiny without the need to die on the cross. This must have been very alluring (temptations by definition are appealing), but Jesus put his foot down. He quoted from the Old Testament: “You shall worship Yahweh your God, and serve Him only.” The worship issue was clear for Jesus. He was not about to hedge even for a moment. He would worship only the Father as God. We must do the same.

Jesus was Worshiped

But what about all of those times when people came up to Jesus and “worshiped” him (Matthew 2:2, 8, 11; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52; John 9:38 et al.)? Do

⁸ The Expositor’s Greek Testament, vol. 1, p. 728

these references fall under the broad umbrella of the word “worship” or the narrow? Some authorities are willing to admit the worship of Jesus may more properly fit into the broad usage rather than the narrow: “Jairus’ act (Mark 5.22; Luke 8.41) was prompted by intense yearning, a father’s self-abandonment in the sore sickness of his child, and must not be taken as implying a full recognition of Christ’s Divinity.”⁹ In fact, several of the times that Jesus is “worshiped,” it is not an act of adoration; rather, it was an act of humility or desperation in an attempt to make a request.¹⁰ A second category of *proskuneo* done to Jesus was performed as recognition of his kingship¹¹. The rest of the times were in the context of understanding or confession that Jesus was the Son of God¹². Jesus is never worshiped as God, but rather as the Son of God—God’s appointed human Messiah (Psalm 2.6-8; 1 Chronicles 17.11-14; Luke 1.31-35).

But, what if the translators think Jesus is God? Then they will translate *proskuneo* as “worship” rather than “bow down”, effectively steering the modern reader to confession that Jesus is God. The reasoning is circular. Jesus is God, so let’s translate *proskuneo* worship. Jesus is worshiped; therefore, he must be God.

An enlightening section of Scripture, which I believe clarifies this, can be found in the second Psalm. “**Worship Yahweh** with reverence and rejoice with trembling. **Do homage to the son**, that he not become angry, and you perish *in* the way, for his wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in him!” (Psalm 2.11-12). We are to worship Yahweh and do homage to the son. The Father is the object of our religious fixation. The son is bowed to in reverence of his position and what he has done. In fact, the words “do homage” can be literally translated “kiss¹³.” Like loyal subjects falling on their knees before their king and kissing his hand, we are to come before God’s appointed king—Jesus Christ. This is exactly what these people did in the references listed above. They fell down before their king or before the one who was able to perform healings as an expression of desperation, gratitude, respect, honor, etc. They were not worshiping in our modern usage of the word; but rather, they were paying homage. If I saw Jesus right now, I would likewise fall to the ground out of respect and pay homage to Yahweh’s anointed king.

Concluding remarks

Every knee will bow to Jesus in reverence and honor (Philippians 2.10), but he is not the object of our religious worship. In fact, the next verse (Philippians 2.11) states that everything is done to the glory of God the Father. It is as if Jesus is in heaven with his finger pointing toward God. Let’s not fixate on his finger, but rather take his cue and look to the “one God and Father of all who is over all through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6)” as our object of religious worship. I have intended herein to begin a discussion on this subject. I do not claim to have exhausted the issue. Our community needs to open an investigation into this practical doctrine. I can only hope that I have helped others to see the issue more clearly and spur some investigation on this subject.

⁹ Hasting’s Bible Dictionary page 14.

¹⁰ Matthew 8.2; 9.18; 15.25; 20.20

¹¹ Matthew 2.2, 8, 11; Mark 15.19

¹² Matthew 14.33; 28.9, 17; Mark 5.6; Luke 24.52; John 9.38; Hebrews 1.6

¹³ This is a remarkable parallel to προσκυνεω because κυνεω also means to kiss.