

Chapter 6 – The Hebrew Concept of Worship

In the previous chapter we saw that coming in the Name of the Eternal is not the same thing as being the Eternal. An agent who is sent out by the Eternal carries the Eternal's Name, speaks the Eternal's words, acts on behalf of the Eternal, and looks like the Eternal. The Eternal fulfills his plans in the earth through his agents and many times it is hard to recognize the difference between the messenger and the one who sent him. One who receives a messenger, receives the one who sent him.

In this chapter, we will take a closer look at the Hebrew concept of worship.

According to the Farlex English Dictionary¹, the word "worship" means:

- 1) v.tr.
 - a. To honor and love as a deity.
 - b. To regard with ardent or adoring esteem or devotion.
- 2) v.intr.
 - a. To participate in religious rites of worship.
 - b. To perform an act of worship.

In religious circles, the word "worship" describes something that is done before what is considered to be a higher being, one acknowledged as a god or a deity. Is this the meaning that the Hebrew Scriptures give this word? No. There is no Hebrew word that means the exact same thing as the English word "worship". There is a word that is many times translated as "worship", but its definition is not the same as the definition of the English term. If we study this Hebrew concept more closely, we will see that it is not a foundation upon which one may claim that the Messiah must be a divine being since he is an object of this type of reverence. Let us take a look at why this is so.

However, before we go into a deeper analysis of the Hebrew word for worship that is used in the Bible, we ought to make it clear that there is a difference between what we in English call "praise" or "thanksgiving" and what we call "worship". We can see praise and thanksgiving as an expression for exaltation through word, song, and different types of instruments, including the human body. Worship, on the other hand, has to do with an inner attitude of respect and reverence, which is expressed through a specific outward action. While praise and thanksgiving are expressed vocally and often loudly, worship is something that finds outlet in a physical expression, which comes from an inner attitude of fear and respect.

Scriptural worship also has to do with animal sacrifice and the consecrated ministry in the tabernacle and temple (see Genesis 22:5; 1 Samuel 1:3; Isaiah 36:7; John 12:20; Revelation 11:1).

The Hebrew Words "Hishtachavah" and "Sagad"

The Hebrew word "hishtachavah" means to bend down, fall down, bow, give honor, kneel, worship. The word comes from "shachah",² which means to bow, bend, be humble.

¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/worship>

The Aramaic word "segid"³ occurs three times in the book of Daniel, chapter three. The word has been translated as "worship". This Aramaic word corresponds with the Hebrew word "sagad"⁴. The word "sagad" only occurs four times in the Hebrew text.⁵ Both this word and its Aramaic counterpart are always tied to false worship in the Scriptures.

"Sagad" means fall down, kneel, bow, adore, worship, give honor, revere.

The word "hishtachavah" is the word most commonly used in the Scriptures and that is the word we will analyze in greater detail.

How is the Hebrew word "hishtachavah" used in the Scriptures?

The Hebrew word "hishtachavah" is used to express worship before the Eternal.

In Genesis 24:26, it is written,

*"The man bowed his head, and **worshiped** ("hishtachavah") the LORD."* (HNV)

In Exodus 4:31, it is written,

*"The people believed, and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Yisra'el, and that he had seen their affliction, then they bowed their heads and **worshiped** ("hishtachavah")."* (HNV)

In Exodus 24:1, it is written,

*"He said to Moshe, "Come up to the LORD, you, and Aharon, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Yisra'el; and **worship** ("hishtachavah") from a distance."* (HNV)

In these three texts the word "hishtachavah" has been translated as "worship" since it is clear that it is speaking about the highest form of reverence before the Eternal. In the first two texts, the word is found together with the word "kadad"⁶, which means to bow. In the third text it stands alone.

In these texts it is obvious that the word "hishtachavah" has to do with the highest expression of reverence before the Eternal. In English this is called "worship".

² **Strong H7812**, shâchâh, *shaw-khaw'*, A primitive root; to *depress*, that is, *prostrate* (especially reflexively in homage to royalty or God): - bow (self) down, crouch, fall down (flat), humbly beseech, do (make) obeisance, do reverence, make to stoop, worship.

³ **Strong H5457**, s^egid, *seg-eed'* (Chaldee); corresponding to H5456: - worship.

⁴ **Strong H5456**, sâgad, *saw-gad'*, A primitive root; to *prostrate* oneself (in homage): - fall down.

⁵ Isaiah 44:15, 17, 19; 46:6

⁶ **Strong H6915**, qâdad, *kaw-dad'*, A primitive root; to *shrivel* up, that is, *contract* or *bend* the body (or neck) in deference: - bow (down) (the) head, stoop.

The word "hishtachavah" denotes an outward physical stance which expresses an inner attitude of reverence. However, as we said earlier, it is also closely connected to the sacrificial ministry. The word can therefore sum up the entire ministry before the Eternal, thus meaning that one both presents him with offerings and bows down in reverence before him.

In Deuteronomy 26:10, it is written,

*"Now, behold, I have **brought the first of the fruit** of the ground, which you, the LORD, have given me. You shall set it down before the LORD your God, and **worship** ("hishtachavah") before the LORD your God:"(HNV)*

In 1 Samuel 1:3, it is written,

*"This man went up out of his city from year to year to **worship** ("hishtachavah") **and to sacrifice** to the LORD of Armies in Shiloh. The two sons of `Eli, Chofni and Pinechas, Kohanim to the LORD, were there."(HNV)*

In these two passages we see that the word "hishtachavah" is tied to the sacrificial ministry in the tabernacle and temple. In addition, there are texts where this word is written as a summary of the entire sacrificial ministry and not only describing an outward act of reverence done after the offering is presented.

In Genesis 22:5, it is written,

*"Avraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go yonder. We will **worship** ("hishtachavah"), and come back to you."(HNV)*

In 1 Samuel 1:19, it is written,

*"They rose up in the morning early, and **worshiped** ("hishtachavah") before the LORD, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkana knew Channah his wife; and the LORD remembered her." (HNV)*

In 1 Samuel 1:24-28, it is written,

*"When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, **with three bulls, and one ephah of meal, and a bottle of wine**, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh: and the child was young. **They killed the bull**, and brought the child to `Eli. She said, Oh, my lord, as your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood by you here, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of him: therefore also I have granted him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is granted to the LORD. He **worshiped** ("hishtachavah") **the LORD there.**"(HNV)*

In 2 Kings 18:22, it is written,

*"But if you tell me, We trust in the LORD our God; isn't that he whose high places and whose altars Hizkiyahu has taken away, and has said to Yehudah and to Yerushalayim, **You shall worship** ("hishtachavah") **before this altar** in Yerushalayim?"(HNV)*

In Jeremiah 7:2, it is written,

*“Stand in the gate of the LORD’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Yehudah, who **enter in at these gates to worship** (“hishtachavah”) **the LORD.**”(HNV)*

From these texts we can see that it is that very act of reverent worship, which is performed in connection with the presenting of the offerings, that is the most important part and main objective for the whole sacrifice. One sacrifices in order to be able to worship. Sacrifice is the way to the Eternal and when one has come before him, one stops and bows in reverent worship in his presence. This act thus becomes the highlight of the sacrificial ministry and is more important than the offering itself. Therefore, on some occasions the word “hishtachavah” stands alone even though it is clear that it is talking about both a physical sacrifice and bowing in worship.

The Hebrew word “hishtachavah” is used to express respect before the Eternal’s heavenly agents.

It is important for us to realize that the word “hishtachavah” does not necessarily need to be understood as worship in the sense that it acknowledges someone as divine and thus expresses reverence for this deity. In that sense, the word does not carry the same weight in the Hebrew as it does in the English. Therefore, it cannot always be translated as “worship” since it is not a matter of worship in several cases where it occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures. The emphasis on the word “hishtachavah” lies, as we mentioned, primarily on an outward action. It is therefore the inner attitude which determines whether or not the word means what in English would be expressed as “worship”. It is the intent behind the action which determines what degree of reverence is given to the person who is being honored by the external action. Outwardly it may seem the same, but the inner attitude is the determining factor when it comes to acknowledging which position of power that is being ascribed to the person who is the object of this form of reverence. So, whenever the word “hishtachavah” occurs it is therefore not obvious whether or not it is describing worship. It depends on the heart intention of the person who is performing this action.

The word “hishtachavah” occurs for the first time in the Scriptures in Genesis 18:2. The context shows that in this case it is not to be understood as “worship”. It is written,

*“He lifted up his eyes and looked, and saw that three men stood opposite him. When he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and **bowed himself** (“hishtachavah”) **to the earth.**”(HNV)*

Notice that here the same word is used that we have seen before and which then expressed worship of the Eternal. Our father Avraham bowed himself to the ground before these heavenly agents out of reverence to the position they held as delegates of the Most High, but he did not worship them. The word “hishtachavah” is more general than the word “worship”. For that reason most translators have not translated “hishtachavah” as “worship” in the places where it does not refer to someone bowing before the Eternal. It is evident that the English word “worship” is much more limited than the Hebrew word “hishtachavah”. “Hishtachavah” does not,

as mentioned, have to be understood as worship but as an external expression of reverence before an authority figure or a person that is being honored. Naturally there is a foundational idea behind this action where one acknowledges the elevated position that the Most High has delegated to different persons in authority. On the one hand it is true that all men are worthy of honor because they reflect the image of Elohim, but those who have been equipped and placed in a higher position of authority and who thus represent the Mighty One are worthy of greater honor and reverence than others. When one honors an agent, one honors and acknowledges the position that the Eternal has delegated to that agent. Thus one honors and acknowledges the Eternal. We spoke about this principle in the previous chapter as well.

Genesis 19 tells of how the two angels went down to Sodom in order to visit Lot. In 19:1, it is written,

*“And at nightfall **the two angels** came to Sodom; and Lot was seated at the way into the town: and when he saw them he got up and came before them, **falling down** (“hishtachavah”) on his face to the earth.”(BBE)*

In Numbers 22:31, it is written,

*“Then the Lord made Balaam's eyes open, and he saw **the angel of the Lord** in the way with his sword in his hand: and he **went down on his face** (“hishtachavah”) to the earth.”(BBE)*

When Yehoshua met the captain of the hosts of the Eternal, he also bowed down to the earth in great reverence, as it is written in Joshua 5:13-15,

*“One day, Joshua was near Jericho when he saw a man standing some distance in front of him. The man was holding a sword, so Joshua walked up to him and asked, “Are you on our side or on our enemies' side?” “Neither,” he answered. “I am here because I am **the commander of the LORD's army**.” Joshua fell to his knees and **bowed down** (“hishtachavah”) to the ground. “I am your servant,” he said. “Tell me what to do.” “Take off your sandals,” the commander answered. “This is a holy place.” So Joshua took off his sandals.” (CEV⁷)*

Just as Moshe had to remove his shoes at the consecrated place where the Eternal's agent revealed himself (Exodus 3:2, 5), so Yehoshua not only had to bow down to the ground in reverence, but also had to remove his shoes in the presence of this heavenly messenger.

Here are four examples of how men fall down on their faces out of reverence for heavenly messengers. The Hebrew text uses the same word that we saw earlier – “hishtachavah” – in those cases translated as “worship” and here to express what Avraham, Lot, Bilam, and Yehoshua did in the presence of these messengers. The Hebrew Scriptures apparently do not differentiate between what we in English call worship and bowing with respect.

⁷ Contemporary English Version

Do we have the right to worship angels? No, worship must only be given to the Eternal. The definition of idolatry is to worship created things instead of the Creator, as it is written in Romans 1:25,

"They exchanged God's truth for a lie and worshipped and served the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."(ISV)

If Avraham, Lot, Bilam, and Yehoshua had worshiped the heavenly messengers, they would have been committing idolatry. Worship of a messenger as though he were the sender is a deceitful form of idolatry. It is therefore evident that the angels did not consider Avraham, Lot, Bilam, and Yehoshua to be worshipping them since they did not rebuke them for it, which was the case in several other similar Scripture passages (Revelation 19:10; 22:9; Luke 4:8). These four men understood the difference between worship of the Most High and great expression of honor to the representatives of the Most High. Outwardly, however, we cannot see any difference in what they did since they bowed down before these angels.

These texts constitute proof that the word "hishtachavah" speaks of an outward act of reverence and must not necessarily be understood as worship.

The Hebrew word "hishtavah" is used to express respect bestowed in the presence of political or spiritual dignitaries.

The word "hishtachavah" is not only used to express deep reverence for the Eternal and his heavenly agents, but for humans as well.

Yitzchak prophesied that the nations would come and bow in reverence and acknowledge the leadership of Israel, as it is written in Genesis 27:29,

*"Let peoples serve you,
Nations **bow down** ("hishtachavah") to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
Let your mother's sons **bow down** ("hishtachavah") to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you,
Blessed be everyone who blesses you."(HNV)*

Yosef's dreams speak of how men would acknowledge his leadership by bowing before him in deep reverence.

In Genesis 37:7-10, it is written,

*"for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and behold, your sheaves came around, and **bowed down** ("hishtachavah") to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Will you indeed reign over us? Or will you indeed have dominion over us?" They hated him all the more for his dreams and for his words. He dreamed yet another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said, "Behold, I have dreamed yet another dream: and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars **bowed down** ("hishtachavah") to me." He told it to his father and to his brothers. His father rebuked him, and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Will I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to **bow ourselves down** ("hishtachavah") to you to the earth?" (HNV)*

In Genesis 42:6; 43:26, 28 we read about how Yosef's dreams were fulfilled when his brothers bowed before him in reverence, as it is written,

*"Yosef was the governor over the land. It was he who sold to all the people of the land. Yosef's brothers came, and **bowed themselves down** ("hishtachavah") to him with their faces to the earth... When Yosef came home, they brought him the present which was in their hand into the house, and **bowed themselves down** ("hishtachavah") to him to the earth... They said, "Your servant, our father, is well. He is still alive." They bowed the head, and **did homage** ("hishtachavah")." (HNV)*

Another example is when Paroh's servants bow in respect before Moshe.

In Exodus 11:8, it is written,

*"All these your servants shall come down to me, and **bow down themselves** ("hishtachavah") to me, saying, "Get out, with all the people who follow you;" and after that I will go out.'" He went out from Par`oh in hot anger." (HNV)*

The descendants of the high priest Eli would have to bow down in reverence before the promised high priest, as it is written in 1 Samuel 2:36,

*"And it shall be that everyone who is left in your house shall come and **bow down** ("hishtachavah") to him for a piece of silver and a piece of bread. And they shall say, Please put me into one of the priests' offices so that I may eat a piece of bread." (MKJV)*

David bowed to the ground before King Shaul.

In 1 Samuel 24:8, it is written,

*"David also arose afterward, and went out of the cave, and cried after Sha'ul, saying, My lord the king. When Sha'ul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth, and **did obeisance** ("hishtachavah")." (HNV)*

Here is a list of additional places in the Scriptures where people bowed in reverence before political and spiritual dignitaries. In all of these cases, the word "hishtachavah" is used.

1 Sam. 25:23, 41	Abigail before King David
1 Sam. 28:14	Shaul before the prophet Shmuel
2 Sam. 1:2	The messenger from Shaul's camp before King David
2 Sam. 9:6, 8	Mefiboshet before King David
2 Sam. 14:22	Yoav before King David
2 Sam. 14:33	Avshalom before King David
2 Sam. 15:5	The people before Avshalom
2 Sam. 16:4	Tziva before King David
2 Sam. 18:21	The Ethiopian before Yoav
2 Sam. 24:20; 1 Chron. 21:21	Araunah before King David
1 Kings 1:16, 31	Bat-Sheva before King David
1 Kings 1:23	Natan before King David
1 Kings 1:53	Adoniah before King Shlomo

2 Kings 2: 15	The prophet disciples before Elisha
2 Kings 4: 37	The Shunnamite before Elisha
Isaiah 45: 14	People from Mitzrayim, Nubia, and Seva before Israel
Isaiah 60: 14	The sons of the oppressors before Yerushalayim
Ruth 2: 10	Rut before Boaz
Ester 3: 2	The servants of the king before Haman
2 Chron. 24: 17	The chiefs of Yehudah before King David

When these people were bowing in complete respect before these dignitaries and spiritual leaders it naturally did not mean that they worshiped them. Here we see further proof that the word "hishtachavah" ought not only to be understood as "worship".

The Hebrew word "hishtachavah" is used to express respect before elders and family members.

Yaakov and his family bowed down in deep respect before the older brother Esav.

In Genesis 33: 3, 6-7 it is written,

*"He himself passed over in front of them, and **bowed himself** ("hishtachavah") to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother... Then the handmaids came near with their children, and they **bowed themselves** ("hishtachavah"). Le'ah also and her children came near, and **bowed themselves** ("hishtachavah"). After them, Yosef came near with Rachel, and they **bowed themselves** ("hishtachavah")." (HNV)*

When Yehudah was placed to rule over the rest of the children of Israel, the word "hishtachavah" is used, as it is written in Genesis 49: 8,

*"Yehudah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies. Your father's sons will **bow down** ("hishtachavah") before you." (HNV)*

Moshe bowed in reverence before his father in law, Yitro.

In Exodus 18: 7, it is written,

*"Moshe went out to meet his father-in-law, and **bowed** ("hishtachavah") and kissed him. They asked each other of their welfare, and they came into the tent." (HNV)*

King Shlomo expressed his respect for his mother Bat-Sheva by bowing down before her, as it is written in 1 King 2: 19,

*"Bat-Sheva therefore went to king Shlomo, to speak to him for Adoniyahu. The king rose up to meet her, and **bowed himself** ("hishtachavah") to her, and sat down on his throne, and caused a throne to be set for the king's mother; and she sat on his right hand." (HNV)*

The Hebrew word “hishtachavah” is used to express respect before persons who are being honored.

Avraham bowed down low before the people in the land.

In Genesis 23:7, 12 it is written,

*“Avraham rose up, and **bowed himself** (“hishtachavah”) to the people of the land, even to the children of Chet... Avraham **bowed himself down** (“hishtachavah”) before the people of the land.” (HNV)*

David bowed three times out of reverence before Shaul’s son Yonatan, as it is written in 1 Samuel 20:41,

*“As soon as the boy was gone, David arose out of [a place] toward the South, and fell on his face to the ground, and **bowed himself** (“hishtachavah”) three times: and they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded.” (HNV)*

The Hebrew word “hishtachavah” is used to express reverent respect before the Messiah.

Now we are going to look at a couple of passages which prophesy about how the Messiah, the anointed eternal king, would become an object of reverent expressions of respect. Psalm 45 does not only describe the wedding between a king in Israel and his bride, but it is also speaking prophetically about the great wedding between the Messiah and his bride that will take place in the future. In verse 11 there is a command for the bride to fall down before her bridegroom, as it is written,

*“Then the King will desire your beauty; Because He is your Lord, **bow down** (“hishtachavah”) to Him.”(NASB⁸)*

Psalm 72 also speaks prophetically about the Messiah’s future rule. He will reign over the whole earth from the throne of David in Yerushalayim. In verse 11 it says the all the kings of the earth will fall down before him, as it is written,

*“And let all kings **bow down** (“hishtachavah”) before him, All nations serve him.”(NASB)*

Here are, therefore, the two witnesses in the Hebrew Scriptures which foretell that the Messiah will be the object of this form of reverent expression.

Conclusion

We are going to end this chapter with 1 Chronicles 29:20, where it is written,

“David said to all the assembly, Now bless the LORD your God. All the assembly blessed the LORD, the God of their fathers, and bowed down their

⁸ New American Standard Bible.

heads and prostrated themselves ("hishtachavah") *before the LORD and the king.*" (HNV)

Here the word "hishtachavah" is used to show how the people expressed their reverence both for the Eternal and for king David by falling down before both of them. This teaches us that the word "hishtachavah" does not reveal which position of authority that the people ascribed to the Eternal in relation to the king. If we go back again to the subject that we covered in the previous chapter, we can understand that when the people bowed down in reverence before the king whom the Eternal had instituted as his agent, they acknowledged Him who gave the king his authority.

Worshipping the created instead of the Creator and acknowledging created beings as if they were divine is forbidden by the Torah. So, with the Torah as the background, we can conclude that the people did not consider David to be deity, and thus, worthy of the same level of worship as the Great Heavenly King. It is, therefore, evident that the word "hishtachavah" can neither reveal to us to which degree the people acknowledged the Eternal's position nor king David's position. We can only come to the logical conclusion that, in their hearts, they acknowledged the Eternal as the Only True Elohim who alone sits enthroned on the highest place above all creation, and that king David was given submissive reverence in their hearts. It is completely unreasonable and out of the question to say that they acknowledged king David as the Most High or as deity. The same principle applies to the Son of David, the Messiah.

We can therefore conclude this chapter by saying that the Hebrew word "hishtachavah" is not an expression of the acknowledgment of a deity, a divinity, or a divine nature, but that it is outward evidence of an inner acknowledgement of persons in authority and dignitaries, either the Eternal himself, or his messengers, his delegated human agents or other persons of honor.

In the next chapter we will see how the Greek word that corresponds with "hishtachavah" is used in the Greek translation of the Apostolic Writings (NT).