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# The Acceptable Worship of the New Covenant People of God

Ira J. Jolivet, Jr.

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Most Christians would no doubt agree that the worship service is the focal point and the highlight of our communal life in the church. Some traditions in the Restoration Movement have emphasized the “items of worship” such as singing, praying, giving, preaching, and communing that we have found to be authorized by direct commands, by examples, or by necessary inferences from the New Testament passages. In the absence of explicit biblical resources that tell us exactly how to enhance these aspects of our worship experience, in recent years we have increasingly turned to the types of things that appeal to our senses such as concert quality audio systems, inspirational scenes projected on huge screens, perfectly pitched praise teams, and joyously colorful banners.

Often overlooked in our desire to have a more meaningful spiritual encounter with our God are the many explicit references to worship in Hebrews, such as Hebrews 9.1, which reads: “Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies.” Here the author states explicitly that in general the first covenant was concerned primarily with regulations for worship. His specific point here concerns the physical space where worship takes place.

In other passages the author refers to the human functionaries who represent the people before God in the worship services and to the gifts and sacrifices that are offered to him on their behalf. In Hebrews 9.6–10, for example, he writes:

Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.

The author’s primary critique here is that the gifts and sacrifices that are at the heart of the worship of God under the first covenant involve regulations for the body that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper.

In Hebrews 7.11–12 he makes a similar point about the priests: “Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.” The author’s critique of the levitical priesthood in Hebrews 10.11–14 takes the form of a contrast: “And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,

‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

From the author’s statements here we may conclude that a major line of reasoning in the overall argument of Hebrews involves the contrast between acceptable and unacceptable worship, a conclusion that is supported by the author’s proclamation that “There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual (for the law made nothing perfect); there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God” (Heb 7.18–19). The assertions here that the community of believers may now approach God through a “better hope” are implicit indications that, whereas God rejected worship under the first covenant, he now accepts the worship of his new covenant people.

The nature of this hope begins to emerge in light of Hebrews 8.1–6, in which the author summarizes the aspects of worship under the first covenant that make it unacceptable to God:

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.

The “better hope” in the previous passage obviously has some relationship to the “better covenant” that Christ mediated and that rests on the foundation of “better promises.” But what exactly are these promises, to what are they being compared, and to whom were they made? The answers to these questions are to be found in the story of Israel’s estrangement from God that resulted in the Babylonian invasion and his promise of reconciliation with the new Israel as told in the oracles of the prophet Ezekiel.

### **God Revokes his Promises to Israel**

According to Walther Zimmerli, “The book of Ezekiel was of great importance for apocalyptic, as is to be seen in the Old Testament in the book of Daniel. Jewish and Christian apocalypses draw from the imagery and material of Ezekiel.”<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel’s book was so important to so many forms of Judaism, including those that accepted Jesus as the Messiah, because he received his oracles during the most traumatic period in the history of Israel. The prophet describes one of the devastating consequences that Israel suffered during this period: “As for you, O house of Israel, thus says the Lord God: Go serve your idols, every one of you now and hereafter, if you will not listen to me; but my holy name you shall no longer profane with your gifts and your idols” (Ezek 20.39). We see, then, that as a result of Israel’s idolatry, God no longer accepted her people’s worship.

God gives the more specific causes of his rejection of Israel’s worship in the oracle of Ezekiel 20.21b–26:

Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness. But I withheld my hand, and acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. Moreover I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, because they had not executed my ordinances, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their ancestors’ idols. Moreover I gave them

<sup>1</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, trans. Ronald E. Clemens (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 75.

statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up of their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord.

The full impact of God's pronouncement that he gave Israel "statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live" takes effect when we realize that this is a revocation of the promise that those who keep the law will live in them.

This incredible act of God was precipitated by a moral deficiency of the people that was evidenced by a history of rejecting God's will. God himself had identified the root cause of this moral deficiency in his warning to Ezekiel in 3.7 that "the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart." God also pleaded with Israel to apply the only effective remedy to this moral condition:

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live. (Ezek 18.30–32)

The people of Israel were critically ill and, without a heart transplant and an infusion of God's Spirit, they would continue in sin and idolatry, for which God had decreed that they must suffer the death penalty. But how were the people of Israel to secure these necessary remedies on their own?

The answer is that they could not do so. So God judged them according to his standard of justice that the one who sins must die, found them guilty of injustice and idolatry, and administered the death penalty upon them at the hands of his executioner, the king of Babylon. In preparation for the execution, God removed his glory from the temple in Jerusalem, the place where he had formerly accepted Israel's worship (Ezek 11.22–23). Then Ezekiel records when the sword fell: "So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them" (Ezek 36.18–19).

In Ezekiel 33.21 the prophet and his fellow exiles receive disheartening news from their former homeland: "In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, someone who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, 'The city has fallen.'" Donald Gowan attempts to describe the impact of those words on the exiles: "The despair that followed the news that Jerusalem had been destroyed took its classic form in another proverb: 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely' (Ezek 37.11). In spite of what Ezekiel had been saying, the exiles' only hope had been the integrity of Jerusalem, and now that was gone. Israel is dead, they said, and this time Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones does not correct the exiles' idea, but acknowledges that they are right: 'These bones are the whole house of Israel.'"<sup>2</sup>

On a deeper level, however, God's very nature compels him to act to bring about reconciliation. As Gowan observes: "The God revealed in Ezekiel is one who acts with terrifying and unrelenting anger against a sinful people, a God whose will cannot be swayed by any appeal (note Ezek 14:12–23). . . . The God revealed in Ezekiel is also one who longs to forgive and who has the power to do so. Eventually Ezekiel will claim that God will one day forgive, renew, and restore, not because of anything anyone deserves, but solely because it is God's nature to do so."<sup>3</sup>

### **God Promises Pardon and Life in the Restored Heavenly Land of Israel**

In accordance with God's merciful nature, he promises to accept the worship of a remnant of Israel once again:

<sup>2</sup> Donald E. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 128.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, says the Lord God, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land; there I will accept them, and there I will require your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your sacred things. As a pleasing odor I will accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples, and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations. You shall know that I am the Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the country that I swore to give to your ancestors. (Ezek 20.40–42)

Two points of the promises here are significant. First, God promises that there will be a place where he will once again accept his people's worship.

The second significant point here is that the people who inhabit this place will know that God is Lord when he fulfills the promise. This is a formulaic statement that appears repeatedly in Ezekiel. With regard to these *statements of recognition* Walther Zimmerli observes that "God's acts do not occur for their own sake, but rather are directed at human beings; they mean to influence human beings and to create knowledge in them... to elicit from them acknowledgement of Yahweh. Yahweh acts because he wants to effect this acknowledgement among human beings."<sup>4</sup> Stated another way, judgment and reconciliation are means to achieve the end of God's self-revelation of his nature and his will for his people.

Zimmerli goes on to describe the exact nature of the self-revelation when he defines knowledge or recognition of God as "an event occurring in the face of Yahweh's acts, acts to which the prophet as proclaimer draws one's attention. In this phrase, 'Yahweh's act,' we must emphasize not only the subject *Yahweh*, but the word *act* as well. According to all the statements in the book of Ezekiel, recognition never comes about in the face of Yahweh's inactive being (described in nominal clauses)... It is always a matter of Yahweh's intervention, either in the history of the hostile nations or of the people of God themselves."<sup>5</sup> Here Zimmerli defines knowledge of God as an *event* associated closely with his actions.

The formulaic statements of recognition are important because the knowledge to which they implicitly refer is an internal awareness that stands in stark contrast to the external statutes of the law "that were not good" and to its ordinances by which Israel "could not live." This same type of knowledge is also implicit in the promises of reconciliation in Ezekiel 36.22–28:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live on the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Here God promises that he will one day perform some act to sanctify his great name which Israel had profaned among the nations. This act entails bringing the exiles back to their own land. This time, however, God will enable them to remain there by first sanctifying them by sprinkling clean water upon them to cleanse them from their sins and then by giving them a new heart and a new spirit so that they will have the will and the power to discern his will and to do his statutes and ordinances.

<sup>4</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *I Am Yahweh*, ed. Walter Brueggemann, trans. Douglas W. Scott (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35–36.

In the oracle of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37.1–14, God dramatically equates the power of the spirit with the power to rise from the dead. Here God infuses the life-giving spirit into the lifeless bones through his spoken word (*logos*). The vision concludes with this promise,

Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God; I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.

So then, whereas death was the inevitable result of the first covenant, life from the dead is the promise of reconciliation. God summarizes all the promises to his reconciled people in Ezekiel 37.24–28:

My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children’s children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and I will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forever.

Here God promises to replace the old covenant with a new one. This one will make up for the deficiencies of the former one because the covenanted people will never die but will live forever in a place where God will also dwell. And since God will place his sanctuary there, he will accept their worship forever.

In chapters 40–48, God shows this place to Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 43.1–4, he is shown a temple that God himself designed and constructed. While beholding this sight Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord return from the east and fill the temple and then he hears a voice that says, “Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever.” Here God will accept the gifts and offerings that make up the worship of his new covenant people.

The only aspect of worship that is missing now is a priest to officiate over the worship in the new temple. In Ezekiel 44.1–3 we see that God also promises to provide this important aspect of acceptable worship: “Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east; and it was shut. The Lord said to me: ‘This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut. Only the prince, because he is the prince, may sit in it to eat before the Lord; he shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate, and shall go out by the same way.’” Here we see that *the prince* has a distinctive cultic status that gives him intimate access to God’s presence in the temple. This status does not seem to arise from any specific priestly lineage. In fact, his origin is a mystery since he just appears.

In Ezekiel 45.15b–17, God describes the exact nature of his priestly function:

This is the offering for grain offerings, burnt offerings, and offerings of well-being, to make atonement for them, says the Lord. All of the people of the land shall join with the prince in Israel in making this offering. But this shall be the obligation of the prince regarding the burnt offerings, the grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the festivals, the new moons, and the sabbaths, all the appointed festivals of the house of Israel: he shall provide the sin offerings, grain offerings, the burnt offerings, and the offerings of well-being, to make atonement for the house of Israel.

As the cultic leader of God's new covenant people, then, the prince/priest will be responsible for providing the sacrificial offerings for the atonement of the people, including the sin offerings and the offerings of well-being or, from the Greek of the Septuagint, *offerings of salvation*.

In summary, then, God promises to construct a holy city that he designed for his sanctified and empowered new covenant people to offer acceptable worship to him for eternity. Order, peace and justice reign in this city. Everyone has their allotted place. God has his place in the sanctuary at the center of the city (Ezek 45.1–3). The people have their places (Ezek 45.6). And the prince/priest has his special place next to God's sanctuary (Ezek 45.7–8).

### **The Promises of Acceptable Worship in Hebrews**

The author of Hebrews used a common rabbinical technique in his interpretation of the oracles in Ezekiel concerning the promises of God. According to Jacob Neusner:

Sages read scripture as a letter written that morning to them in particular about the world they encountered. That is because for them the past was forever integral to the present. So they looked into the Written Torah to construct the picture of reality that is explained by worldview set forth in the Oral Torah.... Scripture's corpus of facts, like nature's, was deemed to transcend the bonds of time. That timelessness accounts for the fact that, in the heavenly academy to which corner of Eden imagination carried them, the great sages could amiably conduct arguments with God and with Moses. Not only so, but they engage in ongoing dialogue with the prophets and psalmists and the other saints of the written Torah as well as with those of their masters and teachers in the oral tradition who reached Eden earlier. A common language joined them all, for in their entire engagement with the written part of the Torah, sages mastered every line, every word, every letter, sorting matters of the day out in response to what they learned in the written tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the author uses this technique to describe the heavenly city that God promised to build in Ezekiel as a present reality: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12.22–24). So there is a place for acceptable worship. It is a reality now! But we must see it with eyes of faith. We are in God's presence when we worship.

But how do we worship according to the new covenant? The author provides several clues in Hebrews 13.10–16:

We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

First, we are to endure sufferings as Christ did in Hebrews 12.1–2: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight of sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began: A Survey of Belief and Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 186–87.

throne of God.” Christ’s faith included patient endurance in submission to God’s will and it was an acceptable sacrifice to God. And rather than yield to fear and the other emotions, we are to trust God as Christ did in the Garden before his crucifixion. By faith we must see that our high priest is interceding on our behalf as in Hebrews 4.14–16: “Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Second, we must offer the sacrifice of praise in the form of “fruit of the lips that confess his name.” We must understand what a privilege it is that God accepts our worship. We must be thankful that we live in the time when God has fulfilled most of his promises in Christ while we await the final phase.

Finally, we must not neglect “to do good.” The obvious question is how do we discern the good in every life situation when we do not have a law to guide every aspect of our lives? As the author of Hebrews reminds believing communities in every age, by faith and obedience we have been given the new heart and spirit that God promised in Ezekiel:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10.19–22)

The author also implicitly reminds us of how we are to use these gifts: “Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb 13.20–21).

### Conclusion

The author of Hebrews encourages his audience to endure the anxieties and disappointments of life that cause people to weaken in faith by seeking to persuade them that their stay here on earth is preparation for an eternity with God:

See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also heaven.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb 12.25–29)

Whatever signs of catastrophe threaten to shake our faith, our worship before the heavenly throne of God should be a source of peace as we remind ourselves and each other that God has a stable, secure, eternal inheritance reserved for us in the heavenly city that he has designed and constructed in fulfillment of the promises he has made to his people of the new covenant.

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