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DISTINGUISHING THE MEANING
OF GREEK VERBS IN THE SEMANTIC
DOMAIN FOR WORSHIP

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The English verb «to worship» is frequently used to translate eight different Greek verbs. The article endeavors to identify similarities and differences between them and to determine their inter-relationship within their semantic field.

- Rom 12:1 «I urge you ... to offer your bodies as living sacrifices... which is your spiritual *worship*.»¹
- Matt 2:11 «On coming to the house, they [the magi] saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and *worshiped* him.»
- Mark 7:6,7 «These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They *worship* me in vain...»
- Rom 1:25 «They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and *worshiped* and served created things rather than the Creator...»

In the Greek New Testament there are eight different Greek verbs which are all translated by the English word «worship.» They are προσκυνέω, εὐσεβέω, λατρουργέω, λατρεύω, σέβουμαι, κάμπτω γόνα, γονυπετέω and σεβάζομαι. There is, in fact, a different Greek word translated by the English word «worship» in each of the above four verses. The range of actions to which these eight verbs refer comprise the semantic domain for the verb «worship.» In order to understand the relationships of these words, and consequently to understand the New Testament on the topic of worship, the senses of these eight verbs must be distinguished. That is, the similarities and differences between them must be identified and the relationship of the verbs within their semantic domain must be determined.

Modern linguistic theory teaches that the meaning of a given word is

¹ All scripture is quoted from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

not located in the word per se but in the relationship a word has to other words in the context of a given occurrence and in contrast to other words which share its semantic domain. Therefore to determine how these eight Greek verbs are related to one another one must first determine how each is related to the other words in the contexts in which they occur.

In his book *Biblical Words and their Meaning*,² Moisés Silva describes sense relationships between words based on either similarity or opposition. Because all eight of these verbs can be properly translated in some contexts by the English word «worship» it is obvious that the semantic relationships of the senses of these verbs are based on similarity. Using the terminology of Eugene Nida and John Lyons, Silva identifies three possible semantic relationships based on similarity: proper synonymy, improper synonymy and hyponymy. Properly synonymous senses belong to words which can be interchanged in some contexts without changing the meaning of the sentence because the senses of the words in question are completely overlapping. An example of words which have properly synonymous senses are the adjectives «brave» and «courageous.» In the second category, improperly synonymous senses have a semantically contiguous relationship. That is, although they share a semantic sense they cannot be used interchangeably without changing the thought. An example of words having this sense relationship are «crawl,» «walk» and «run.» These verbs share the sense of movement but they cannot be properly interchanged in any given occurrence. The third semantic relationship based on similarity, hyponymy, is an inclusive relationship between senses where one sense is completely included in another more general sense. For instance, «rose» is hyponymous with «flower» because the sense of the word «flower» totally includes the sense of the word «rose.»

Using these categories I have attempted to analyze and organize the relationships of the eight Greek verbs for worship as they are used in the Greek New Testament. To this end, I have included in my purview occurrences of these verbs in the extant works of Josephus, Philo and Epictetus.

The relative frequency of the occurrence of words within a semantic domain is meaningful in determining semantic relationships because the more frequently a given word is used in comparison to other words in its semantic domain the more general and inclusive its meaning tends to be. *προσκυνέω* is the most frequently used of the eight verbs for «worship» in both the New Testament and the three extra-biblical works. *λατρεύω* is the second most frequently used verb of this domain in the New Testament. In contrast, *εὐσεβέω* is the second most frequently used of the verbs in the extra-biblical works but is used only twice in the New Testament. The disproportionate frequency of *εὐσεβέω* in the New Testament may suggest

² Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: an Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1983).

a deliberate lexical choice by the New Testament writers. This possibility will be discussed later.

Semantic relationships among several words within a semantic domain can be determined by examining the contexts of their occurrences and answering questions such as: does the subject or object of the verbal action distinguish the sense of one verb from another? Does the setting of the action distinguish the sense of one verb from another? Is there attendant action associated with any of the verbs? Does a given verb always occur in a particular syntactical construction? When the contexts of the occurrences of the eight verbs for «worship» were analyzed with these questions in mind, patterns began to emerge from which the relationships of these eight verbs can be constructed.

λατρεύω and *λειτουργέω* share a sense which distinguishes them from the other Greek verbs for worship. In the New Testament *λατρεύω* is used to designate duties performed in a religious vocation. Forms of *λατρεύω* are used in the New Testament, for instance, to refer to the temple service of Anna (Luke 2:37) and the altar work of the Old Testament priests (Heb 8:5). As used in the New Testament, the word *λατρεύω* denotes actions which are always evaluated positively when God is the grammatical object and negatively with reference to any other object (eg., Matt 4:10; Luke 4:7,8).

In Romans 12:1 Paul uses the cognate noun of *λατρεύω*, *λατρεία*, in reference to the religious duties of all Christian believers. The presentation of our bodies to God as a living sacrifice (*θυσίαν ζώσαν*) in Romans 12:1 is expounded by Paul as *τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν*, «your reasonable religious service.» *λατρεία*'s strong association with acts performed in a religious vocation coupled with the phrase *θυσίαν ζώσαν* («living sacrifices») forms a direct allusion to the sacrifices performed by the cultic priesthood of ancient Israel. By choosing a noun form of *λατρεύω* to refer to worship, Paul is drawing a close parallel between Israel's priests and the priesthood of all Christian believers. The priests of Israel offered sacrifices of dead animal flesh on the altar to God. What sacrifice, if any, is *λογικὴν*, that is, reasonable or appropriate, for the corresponding Christian priesthood of believers to offer? According to Romans 12:1, the appropriate sacrifice made by the Christian «priest» is the offering of his or her own living human flesh (i.e., one's life) to God. Paul therefore sets worship as the offering of a Christian's own body to God within the framework of cultic duty.

Many modern English translations, including the NIV, translate *τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν* in Romans 12:1 as «your spiritual worship.» In light of the cultic sense of *λατρεία*, the English word «worship» is both far too general and too conditioned by Western culture to adequately capture Paul's vivid analogy of the Christian to the Old Testament priest. A suggested paraphrase would be «I urge you... to offer your bodies a living sacrifice... your appropriate priestly duty as a Christian.»

The verb *λειτουργέω*, from which the English word «liturgy» derives,

has a more general sense. Like λατρεύω, λειτουργέω can be used to refer to duties associated with religious vocation. It is used in this sense by Philo and Josephus to refer to the ministry of the priests of ancient Israel and by Epictetus to refer to cultic rites at a festival for Nero.³ But λειτουργέω is also used to refer to duties performed in civil office. Paul uses λειτουργέω in Romans 13:6 to refer to civil rulers as servants of God.

Because λειτουργέω has the more general sense of these two verbs that refer to performing the duties of office, it includes the sense denoted by λατρεύω. Therefore λατρεύω is hyponymous with λειτουργέω. προσκυνέω is the most frequently used word for worship in the New Testament. However, «worship» is only one of three senses of this verb. προσκυνέω also has the sense of paying political homage and the sense of entreaty.

προσκυνέω is used in the New Testament with the sense of entreaty or petition. In the Gospel narratives the subject of the verbal action expressed by προσκυνέω is often found petitioning Jesus for assistance or healing (eg., Matt 20:20; John 12:20). When it is used in this sense of entreaty a religious connotation is not implied by the word. To understand προσκυνέω as referring to worship when used in this sense of entreaty, though perhaps theologically justifiable in reference to Jesus, is not lexically justifiable.

When προσκυνέω is used in this sense of entreaty, it is properly synonymous with γονυπετέω, which also means to entreat another human being on bended knee (eg., Matt 17:14; 27:29; Mark 1:40; 10:17). The writings of Josephus clearly show that, in addition to entreaty, προσκυνέω was the verb employed to refer to the action performed to express political homage when a person of lesser station approached a nobleman, king or queen (eg., AJ. 20.28; AJ. 20.65). In this royal context it refers to a gesture of allegiance from one human being to another, probably referring to some type of genuflection. Again it would be misleading to translate προσκυνέω by the English word «worship» when used in this sense, for the divine element suggested by the English word «worship» is totally absent from the royal context.

Most English versions of Matthew 2:11 translate προσκυνέω with the English verb «worship.» However, when προσκυνέω is used in Matthew 2 to describe the intent and actions of the visiting magi at the birth of Jesus, it is, I believe, this sense of political homage that Matthew intended. As delegates of an eastern monarch the magi came seeking the newly-born, human king of the Jewish nation in order to pay political homage. Recognizing him as royalty, they genuflected before the Christ child as they presented their gifts. It is an example of illegitimate totality transfer to understand by Matthew's choice of προσκυνέω that the magi shared the theological understanding which the English word «worship» implies to Christians. A

³ Philo, Mos. 2.276, Ebr. 2.6; Josephus, AJ. 19.191, 20.218; Epictetus, Arr. 1.2.13.

suggested translation of this verse might be, «they saw the child with his mother Mary and they paid homage to him.»

Nevertheless, having come to Jerusalem with such a prestigious mission it is nonetheless extraordinary that the magi should find themselves at a manger in Bethlehem. Matthew uses this remarkable event at the birth of Jesus to emphasize Jesus' royal role and to portend the submission of the gentiles to His subsequently revealed divine authority.

When used in this sense of political homage, προσκυνέω is properly synonymous with κύνειν γόνα, «to bend the knee» (eg., Phil 2:10). In many verses in the New Testament προσκυνέω is used in its third sense, that is, to refer to the stance one is to have in relation to God and to no other (eg., Matt 4:10; Luke 4:7,8). When used in this sense προσκυνέω expresses submission to God's supreme authority. From the perspective of God accommodating revelation to human understanding, this use of προσκυνέω might be considered a metaphorical expression stemming from the sense of προσκυνέω as paying political homage to royalty. In other words, because people understood the ramifications of their relationship to the supreme authority of their nation, as expressed by προσκυνέω, the New Testament writers could use this word to describe one's proper relationship to God's authority.

Whether or not the New Testament use of προσκυνέω is considered metaphorical, the actions and attitudes referred to by this verb are always evaluated positively with used with respect to God and Jesus and always condemned when directed toward angels, Satan, demons or pagan deity (eg., Luke 4:7,8; Acts 7:43; Rev 9:20). In the first century context, only the God of the Jews is worthy of the allegiance that προσκυνέω signifies. Jesus states this explicitly in His response to Satan's temptations, «You shall worship (προσκυνέω) the Lord your God and serve (λατρεύω) Him only.» (Matt 4:10/Luke 4:8) Here Jesus prescribes both submission to God's authority and the performance of religious duties devoted to Him.

The verbs used by Jesus in this command, as remembered and recorded by the apostles, may have influenced their subsequent choice of words when writing of the Christian's relationship to God. This may account for why προσκυνέω and λατρεύω are, respectively, the first and second most frequently used words for worship in the New Testament. The distinct preference for these words is most apparent when one considers that εὐσεβέω is a very commonly used word for worship in the extra-biblical writings. Josephus uses εὐσεβέω to describe Solomon's gestures toward God, the actions of the repentant Mannasseh and the religious practice of the ancient Israelites (AJ 7.384; AJ 10.46; AJ 10.68). Yet this verb occurs only twice in the entire New Testament, and never in reference to Christians and their Lord. Luke uses εὐσεβέω once to quote Paul's description of the religious activity of the Athenians toward the unknown god in Acts 17:23. The second occur-

ce is in Paul's letter to Timothy admonishing believers to care for their families in I Tim 5:4.

εὐσεβέω refers to acts done for the benefit of or in obedience to the object of devotion, whether that object is human or divine. It is used both to refer to acts of piety toward one's god and also to acts of devotion toward another human being. For instance, Josephus uses it to refer to obedience to a father's instructions. (AJ 7.224) As mentioned, Paul uses it to refer to acts of devotion toward one's family. (I Tim. 5:4) When, however, εὐσεβέω was used to express devotion to a deity, it may have had connotations which the writers of the New Testament wished to avoid. Philo uses εὐσεβέω to refer to the pagan's devotion to their gods which resulted in the burning of their children as sacrifices. (De Specialibus Legibus 1.312) Perhaps when used in the sense of devotion to deity, εὐσεβέω had become tainted by association with pagan religious ritual to the extent that New Testament writers preferred to use other verbs, except when using it in its second sense of devotion to another human being.

σεβέομαι is another New Testament verb for «worship» from the same root. In the eight occurrences of this verb in the New Testament, it is never used with a Christian believer as subject. Luke uses participles of σεβέομαι in Acts to refer to the God-fearers. (eg., Acts 13:43; 13:50; 16:14). Twice σεβέομαι is used in the New Testament with Jews as the subject, both times in the condemning quote from Isaiah, «these people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They worship [σεβέομαι] me in vain.» (Matt 15:9//Mark 7:7) The New Testament writers use σεβέομαι always in a negative context to refer to the flawed or inadequate attempts at worship by a spiritually distant people, such as pagans, God-fearing gentiles and wayward Jews. A possible paraphrase of this verse might be «these people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They do pious acts toward me in vain.»

The last of the eight Greek verbs for worship, σεβάζομαι, is a very rare word in the extant first-century works. It occurs only once in the New Testament where Paul uses it in Romans 1:25 to refer to those who have «exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worship (σεβάζομαι) and serve (λατρεύω) the creature instead of the creator.» This verb does not occur in the LXX or in Josephus, Philo or Epictetus. In fact, other than in Romans 1:25, a search of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae⁴ with the Ibycus computer system reveals that it next appears in the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Clement uses σεβάζομαι to refer to pagan religious revelry at the Bacchus festival. (Protrepticus 2.39.2) In Origen's writings the verb appears twice but only when he is quoting Romans 1:25. (Contra 7.47; Commentary on Romans 1.25).

Given at least seven other more common verbs for worship, it is curious

⁴ TLG, University of California, Irvine, Pilot CD Rom *C, 1987.

that Paul alone uses σεβάζομαι, and only once at that, in his letter to the Romans. Dio Cassius, a late second-century historian, may provide some insight into Paul's lexical choice. In his Roman history, Dio Cassius discusses the derivation of the title «Caesar Augustus.» He writes,

For when they wished to call him by some distinctive title, and men were proposing one title and another... [Caesar] took the title of «Augustus.» signifying that he was more than human... therefore, they addressed him also in Greek as *sebastos*, meaning an august personage, from the passive of the verb *sebazō*, «to revere.» (Roman History 53.16.7.)

The passive form of σεβάζω is σεβάζομαι, the form Paul used when writing to the Romans about the depravity of humankind in Romans 1:25.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped [εἰσεβάσθησαν] and served [ἐλάτρευσαν] the creature rather than the creator...

The Roman emperor, claiming divinity and demanding official acts of ritual worship, personified the very point Paul was making about unregenerate human nature worshipping the creature instead of the creator. The Christians of Rome could not miss the allusion to the imperial cult made by Paul through his lexical choice of the particular verb σεβάζομαι.

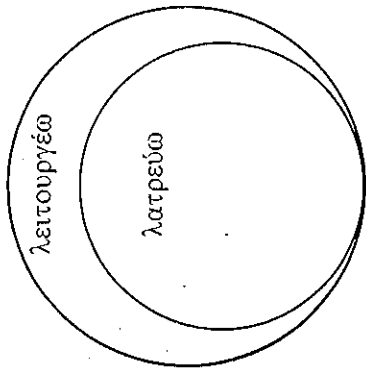
The negative evaluation of the phrase σεβάζομαι and λατρεύω («worship and serve») with the creature as object in Romans 1:25 stands in contrast to Jesus' command to προσκυνέω and λατρεύω («worship and serve») God alone. The two Greek phrases are indistinguishable when translated into English, but a semantic distinction is clearly perceived in the original.

How can the relationships of these eight verbs be summarized? Louw and Nida have taken up the task of classifying New Testament Greek words by their semantic domains. They discuss the complexities of semantic relationships in the introduction to their Greek-English lexicon,

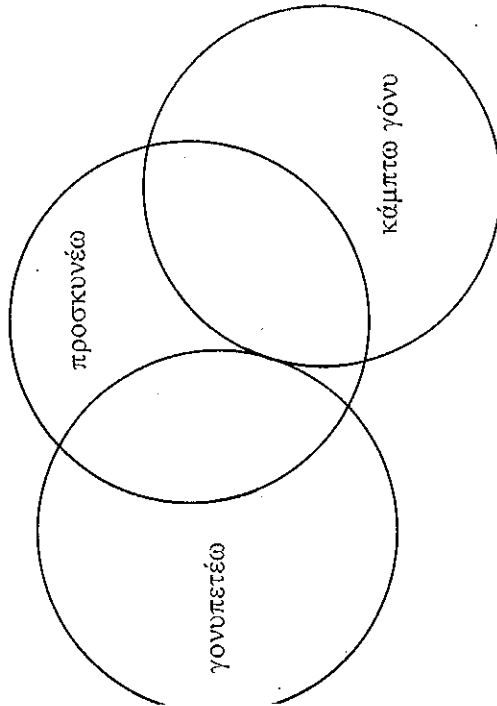
... both the different meanings of the same word and the related meanings of different words tend to be multi-dimensional and are only rarely orthogonal in structure, that is to say, the different meanings tend to form irregularly shaped constellations rather than neatly organized structures.⁵

Within the «irregularly shaped constellation» formed by the New Testament words for worship, three clusters of sense emerge: 1) worship as serving a deity by performing cultic acts in a religious vocation (λατρεύω, λειτουργέω and possibly σεβάζομαι), 2) worship as submitting to divine authority (προσκυνέω, κάμπτω γόνη), 3) worship as the exercise of personal piety (εὐσεβέω, σεβέομαι and probably σεβάζομαι).

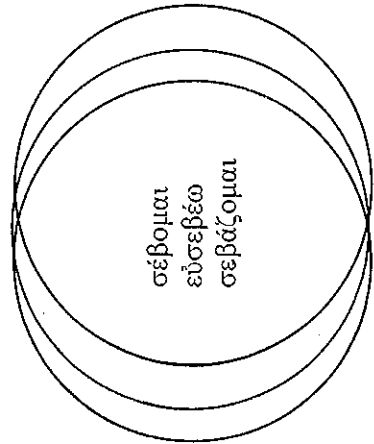
⁵ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, vol 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), p. xviii.



HYPONIMY



IMPROPER
SYNONYMY



PROPER
SYNONYMY

Identification of the relationships of the words within each cluster can be attempted. λατρεύω and λειτουργιέω have a inclusive relationship, the more specific sense of λατρεύω being included in the more general sense of λειτουργιέω.

προσκυνέω and κάμπτω γόνυ have an overlapping relationship when used in the sense of political homage; προσκυνέω and γονυπετέω overlap when used in the sense of petition or entreaty.

εὐσεβέω, σεβομαι and probably σεβάζομαι have overlapping senses that cannot be lexically differentiated on the basis of the data included in this analysis. In the texts examined they had properly synonymous senses when used with respect to deity.

These three clusters of meaning are related to one another by improperly synonymous contiguity. That is, all three clusters share a sense that can appropriately be used to refer to the worship of divinity, but each cluster has a distinctive sense that dictates its choice in certain contexts where words of another cluster would be inappropriate. When used in its sense of submission to divine authority, προσκυνέω is the most general and inclusive verb in the semantic domain for worship.

In comparison to other words in the same semantic domain, the prevalence in the New Testament of προσκυνέω and λατρεύω to refer to Christian worship indicates that Christian worship centers on submission to God's authority and performing the duties associated with the general office of the priesthood of believers.

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