

# Swept off your Feet

## Beyond Worship-as-Usual

Connecting with God for a Strong Finish

### PART I

## A Foundation for Worshipers

Semantic Shift and Facedown Reverence

### CHAPTER 1

## Worship is a Big Word

### Semantic Shift

Books about worship typically include *nice* definitions. Some appear more *sophisticated* than others. Usually they mention bowing with reverence and then emphasize praise with adoration. Bowing seems *silly* however, especially in western civilizations where prostration tends to be impractical and carries a social stigma. Facedown worship is not a *pretty* sight in cultures oriented toward *prestige*.

Consider the italicized words in the previous paragraph using definitions from the “Online Etymology Dictionary”.<sup>1</sup> During the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, *nice* meant foolish, stupid, or ignorant. *Sophisticated* originally meant corrupt and *silly* meant pious or blessed. At one time, *pretty* meant manly and *prestige* meant deception. Over time, the meaning associated with these words has changed. Linguists call this phenomenon se-

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions from [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com) (accessed 3-14-10)

mantic shift or semantic progression. Sometimes definitions change so much that words no longer hold their original meaning.

In the forward to “Mere Christianity”, C. S. Lewis explains how semantic shift can spoil the usefulness of a word. He cites the word gentleman as an example.<sup>2</sup> This word originally meant one who possessed a coat of arms and owned an estate. According to Lewis, the meaning shifted to reflect a value judgment based on behavior rather than information based on fact. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, grammar editors began prompting writers to replace the word gentleman altogether with man or a less gender specific word like person.

Since antiquity, worship has acquired a variety of definitions; today it means different things to different people. Because religious traditions vary and social trends change, the meaning associated with words like worship requires ongoing clarification.

The conventional terminology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century considers participating in a religious ceremony as worship. It may or may not involve a liturgy, ritual, offering, or mass. Enter this word into an internet search engine and worship music populates the results, along with the musicians who perform it. When composed with the appropriate lyrics, music and song appear to be synonymous with worship. Using the Jewish web directory “mavensearch.com”, synagogues and temples dominate the search results as houses of worship.

Based on evolving customs, worship leaders, do worship music, during worship services, in houses of worship. This jargon reflects a bundle of semantic shifts. As if by convention, saying and doing religion has become an act of worship.

### **Semantic Stretch**

The following table compares popular Bible translations and their progressive use of the word worship. The “Total” column reflects how

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<sup>2</sup> CS Lewis, Mere Christianity, 1943, Macmillan Publishing Co., p. 9-11.

much variability exists between translators. Contemporary versions ascribe the label of worship to a broad range of attitudes and activities. Translations, which are more literal, refrain from paraphrasing this word to suit the verbal vogue.

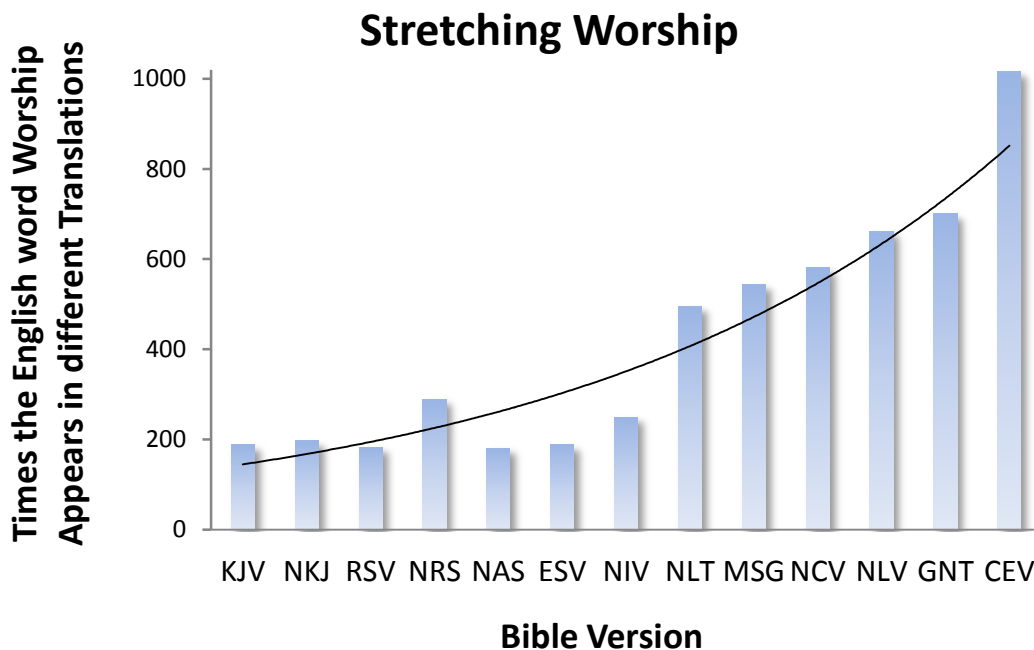
### **Bible Versions and their use of the word Worship (s, ed, ing, er, ers)**

	OT	NT	Total	© Date	Publisher
<b>KJV</b>	115	73	<b>188</b>	1611	<i>King James Version</i> Public Domain, USA
<b>NKJ</b>	127	70	197	1982	<i>New King James Version</i> Thomas Nelson Publishers
<b>RSV</b>	109	74	183	1973	<i>Revised Standard Version</i> National Council of Churches
<b>NRS</b>	169	120	289	1989	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i> National Council of Churches
<b>NAS</b>	118	63	<b>181</b>	1995	<i>New American Standard Version</i> Lockman Foundation
<b>ESV</b>	115	74	189	2001	<i>English Standard Version</i> Good News / Crossway
<b>NIV</b>	175	75	250	1984	<i>New International Version</i> International Bible Society
<b>NLT</b>	393	102	495	1996	<i>New Living Translation</i> Tyndale House Publishers
<b>MSG</b>	451	93	544	2002	<i>The Message</i> , Navpress
<b>NCV</b>	475	106	581	2005	<i>New Century Version</i> Thomas Nelson, Inc.
<b>NLV</b>	404	257	661	1969	<i>New Living Version</i> , Christian Literature International
<b>GNT</b>	598	103	701	1992	<i>Good News Translation</i> American Bible Society
<b>CEV</b>	875	141	<b>1016</b>	1995	<i>Contemporary English Version</i> American Bible Society

Compared with the King James Version of the Bible, translators for the Contemporary English Version have stretched the word worship

from 188 uses to 1,016—a 540 percent increase. Compared with the more literal New American Standard Version, they stretched it from 181 to 1,016—a 561 percent increase. In just 26 years, the New Revised Standard Version stretched this word 158 percent from the earlier Revised Standard Version. This dramatic increase in the use of the word worship demonstrates a significant semantic shift.

The following graph illustrates how modern translators have multiplied the English word worship (s, ed, ing, er, ers) by stretching it in contemporary language Bibles.



Modern language Bibles like the Contemporary English Version gain a sizable increase in word usage by extending the concept of service into worship. For example, they selectively render the following Hebrew and Greek words as worship instead of preserving their original and more conventional meaning:

- |                |                   |                       |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Hebrew:</b> | <i>`Abad</i>      | To serve              |
|                | <i>Mishmereth</i> | Ceremonial obligation |
| <b>Greek:</b>  | <i>Latreuo</i>    | To serve              |
|                | <i>Latreia</i>    | Service               |
|                | <i>Threskeia</i>  | Religious ceremony    |

According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament and others, the Hebrew verb, `abad (pronounced ä-văd') acquired the notion of worship and obedience from its Arabic root, not the Old Aramaic root, which means to do or make.<sup>3</sup>

### **Worship is more than a Word**



Calling a thistle a rose will not transform it into an elegant blossom. In the same way, assigning the label of worship to a certain activity will not convert it into wor-



ship. Labels do not change reality. No matter how much the semantics shift or stretch, worship remains fundamentally the same—at least in God's mind.

### **With that said, consider the following questions**

- Are you a worshiper?  
Based on your behavior or based on fact?
- What informs your understanding of worship?  
Cultural tradition or biblical precedent?
- Do you worship God or an abbreviated version of Him?
- What motivates you to worship?
- How, when, and where do you worship in spirit and truth?

Without accurate information, false assumptions readily assert themselves. As these assumptions influence vocabulary trends, they also influence how we worship, where we worship, when we worship, why we worship, and most importantly, what type of God we worship.

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<sup>3</sup> Harris, Archer, Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1980, p. 639. Gesenius' *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979, p. 598.

True worshipers do not mutate and evolve with the vernacular that frames them. As wordsmiths, songwriters, authors, and theologians influence our understanding of worship, connecting with the truth about God will always set us straight. The veracity of His love will literally sweep us off our feet. When properly understood, God's presence, performance, and promises are more than we can stand.

