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CHAPTER 1

Worship is a Big Word with a Complex History

Semantic Shift and Facedown Reverence

Preconceived notions affect how we understand and express the concept of worship. Wikipedia names about 200 cognitive biases of various types, both conscious and unconscious.¹ They influence our perceptions, interpretations, decisions, reactions, and interactions with others. Fuller and Murphy make a strong case based on neuroscientific evidence, that a properly functioning brain operates with bias—for better and for worse. They assert, “There’s no shame in having unconscious bias; it’s a natural part of the human condition”.²

This elephant in the room behaves more like a stealthy fox or devious weasel. Nonetheless, humility will tame the bias beast in the church and in our mind. More importantly, it will defuse divine opposition and activate sovereign grace; “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble”.³

“We all have bias, so let’s acknowledge it and improve.”

Pamela Fuller and Mark Murphy, *The Leaders Guide to Unconscious Bias*⁴

Semantic Shift

Words like worship require ongoing clarification because cultural trends influence social norms, which affect religious tradition—and our biases. Throughout history, worship has come to mean different things to different people.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases (accessed 1/26/2021)

² Pamela Fuller & Mark Murphy with Anne Chow, *The Leaders Guide to Unconscious Bias*, Simon and Schuster, NY, 2020 by Frank Covey Co., p. 1.

³ James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 NIV

⁴ Pamela Fuller & Mark Murphy with Anne Chow, *The Leaders Guide to Unconscious Bias*, Simon and Schuster, NY, 2020 by Frank Covey Co., p. 1.

Semantic shift refers to altering the meaning of a word over time. These changes may include broadening, narrowing, or a complete shift in meaning. According to Wikipedia, semantic shift (also called semantic change, semantic progression, or semantic drift) “is the evolution of word usage—usually to the point that the modern meaning is radically different from the original usage”.⁵



Coat of Arms for Verdalia, 52nd
Grand Master Knights of Malta

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.⁶ 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 20th Century, grammar editors began prompting writers to replace the word gentleman altogether with man or a less gender specific word like person.

Semantic Shift and Worship

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”.⁷ During the 13th 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 semantic shift. Sometimes definitions change so much that words no longer hold their original meaning.

Typical terminology in the 21st century considers participating in a religious ceremony as worship. It may or may not involve a liturgy, ritual, offering, or mass.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_change (Accessed 7-3-16)

⁶ CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1943, Macmillan Publishing Co., p. 9-11.

⁷ Definitions from www.etymonline.com (accessed 3-14-10)

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.⁸

Based on evolving customs, worship leaders do worship music, during worship services, in houses of worship. This jargon reflects a bundle of semantic shifts inconsistent with the biblical precedent. As if by convention, saying and doing religion has become an act of worship. In contrast, when the Bible describes an expression of worship, bowing or falling facedown dominates the narrative.

Semantic Stretch and Worship

The following table compares popular Bible translations and their progressive use of the word worship. The “Total” column reflects how much variability exists between translators. Contemporary versions ascribe the label of worship to a broad range of attitudes and activities. The more literal translations refrain from paraphrasing this word to suit the verbal vogue.

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

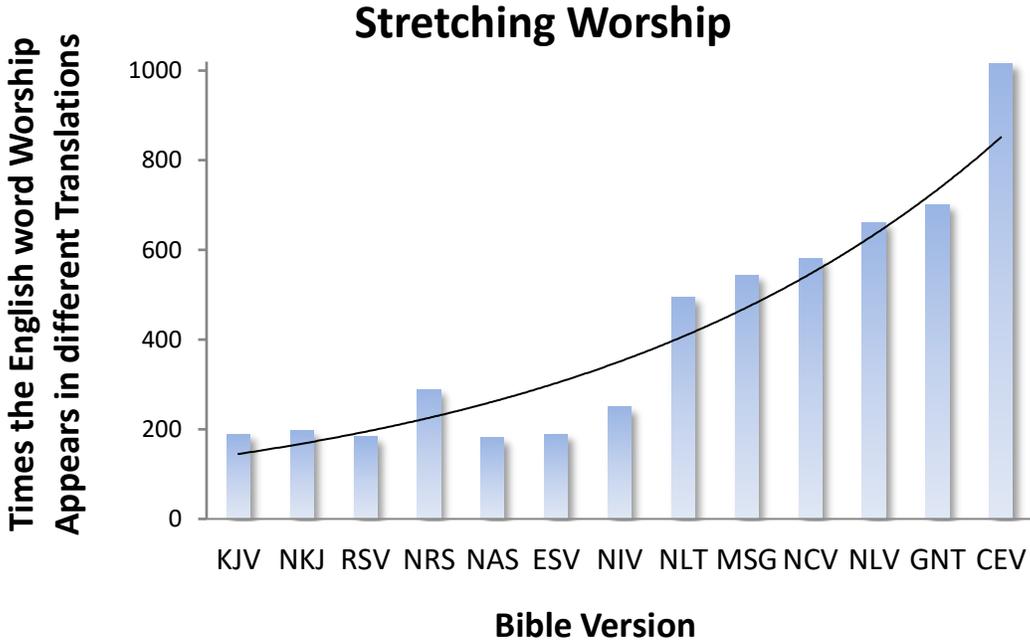
	OT	NT	Total	© Date	Publisher
KJV	115	73	188	1611	<i>King James Version</i> Public Domain, USA
NKJ	127	70	197	1982	<i>New King James Version</i> Thomas Nelson Publishers
RSV	109	74	183	1973	<i>Revised Standard Version</i> National Council of Churches
NRS	169	120	289	1989	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i> National Council of Churches
NAS	118	63	181	1995	<i>New American Standard Version</i> Lockman Foundation
ESV	115	74	189	2001	<i>English Standard Version</i> Good News / Crossway
NIV	175	75	250	1984	<i>New International Version</i> International Bible Society
NLT	393	102	495	1996	<i>New Living Translation</i> Tyndale House Publishers

⁸ mavensearch.com (accessed 2-22-17)

MSG	451	93	544	2002	<i>The Message</i> , Navpress
NCV	475	106	581	2005	<i>New Century Version</i> Thomas Nelson, Inc.
NLV	404	257	661	1969	<i>New Living Version</i> , Christian Literature International
GNT	598	103	701	1992	<i>Good News Translation</i> American Bible Society
CEV	875	141	1016	1995	<i>Contemporary English Version</i> American Bible Society

Compared with the King James Version of the Bible, translators for the Contemporary English Version stretch the word worship from 188 uses to 1,016—a 540 percent increase. Compared with the more literal New American Standard Version, they stretch 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 ceremony or service into wor-

ship. For example, they selectively render the following Hebrew and Greek words as worship instead of preserving their original and conventional meaning:

Hebrew:	<i>`Abad</i>	To serve
	<i>Mishmereth</i>	Ceremonial obligation
Greek:	<i>Latreuo</i>	To serve
	<i>Latreia</i>	Service
	<i>Threskeia</i>	Religious ceremony
	<i>Eusebeo</i>	To practice piety

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. The Old Aramaic root suggests service instead because it means to do or make.⁹

Protestant Bible translators consistently render the Hebrew word *shachah* and the Greek word *proskuneo* as worship or bow down. Translators for the Roman Catholic Douay-Rheims and New American Bibles refrain from using the word worship. Instead, they translate these same Hebrew and Greek words as adore or adoration.

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 worship. 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.

True worshipers maintain their expressive integrity—they do not mutate and evolve as wordsmiths, songwriters, authors, and theologians modify our vernacular. Without accurate information, false assumptions readily assert themselves. These assumptions influence vocabulary trends. They also influence how we wor-

⁹ 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.

ship, where we worship, when we worship, why we worship, and most importantly, what type of God we worship.

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 rendition of Him?
- What motivates you to worship?
- How, when, and where do you worship in spirit and truth?

[Previous Chapter: I Thought I Knew Worship](#)

[Next Chapter: English Hebrew Greek Words for Worship](#)

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