

A Review of Enthroned on Our Praise: An Old Testament Theology of Worship

The author, Timothy Pierce, wrote this book to bring theology back into worship, an issue so central to our relationship with God. Pierce focuses on the Old Testament because he believes, as do I, that the church as a whole has disregarded the OT and not given it the proper attention it deserves as the first two thirds of inspired Scripture. In addition, he shows that there is a unified message in both the OT and NT: that God has always been a God of grace and expectations. Through studying who God was in the past and His relationship with the Jews and all of humanity in OT times, Pierce hopes that we will know both God and ourselves better, and come to worship Him more truly. Finally, He also writes with an overarching idea of worship as both event and lifestyle, and how the two are inseparable in God's eyes. In this review, I will summarize each of the chapters while interlacing my own thoughts where relevant.

In Chapter 1, Pierce covers the "Primeval Prologue," or the first eleven chapters of Genesis from the creation account through the Tower of Babel, in order to characterize God, humanity, and their relationships, long before God's covenant with His chosen people, Israel. In Genesis, we see God's communicative nature (He *speaks* things into existence), His power (especially over the seas), and His effortless creativity. Further, we see His bountiful provision as He first creates a world suitable for living creatures, before creating them. While quite evident, this pattern was broken when God created Adam before Eve, for Eve would provide a crucial and intimate human relationship that Adam so desperately needed and lacked at first.

Pierce goes on to write of how Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, to reflect His nature in all areas of life, to both serve and worship Him. Here, Pierce talks about the plural pronoun, "Us," used to refer to God in Gen. 1:26 and seems to think that this pronoun does not refer to the three persons of God. While he sees a potential reference to God's Spirit in Gen. 1:2, which would better explain the plural pronoun, he notes that references to the Spirit do not occur in other places where the plural pronoun is used, such as Gen. 3:22 or 11:7. He also argues that, in a polytheistic world, the idea of a Trinitarian God would be very confusing. Instead, the author seems to hold the idea that God was conferring with His heavenly court in Gen. 1:26. This is the one place

in the book where I tend to disagree and for significant reasons. It seems unnecessary for God's Spirit to be mentioned in order for "Us" to refer to the reality of the community within the Godhead. Moreover, following the implications of the author's viewpoint, we would then be created in the image of God and His angels. It seems only appropriate that God's Trinitarian nature would be at least hinted at right from the beginning, especially where we see Him creating humanity in *community*, something that originates from His own being.

Pierce goes on to talk about how Adam and Eve (and all of us) were made from dust, so that even before man's fall, man was *dependent* on God – limited, fragile, and in need of sustenance. Along with the tree of life, representing God's provision, the tree of knowledge is also in the garden and represents the option of autonomy versus dependence on God. The struggles evident in Adam and Eve as sin entered the world also abound today and are detrimental to our worship: 1) doubts and suspicion, which affect our trust, and 2) legalism or the setting up of our own boundaries. How encouraging, though, that even in Genesis we can see God's grace along with His judgment in response to man's sin. Ultimately, Christ would be God's final and climactic Word spoken to creation, His true image sent to redeem mankind, so that we could enjoy and worship Him forever in heaven, where once again we see the tree of life, His provision, in the book of Revelation. In summary, we see that it was all about relationship from the beginning.

In Chapter 2, Pierce shows how through the Pentateuch God establishes the foundations for understanding and interacting with Him in relationship, which also impact our relationships with others. We see the tension between God's immanence and transcendence, and also His grace and justice. We see His holiness in connection with His mercy and mystery. Through the first three of the Ten Commandments, we learn that we are to worship God alone because of His singularity, uniqueness, and history with us, and we are to do this in both event and lifestyle. Further, we are not to put God in a box or use His name in a way that would render it worthless in what it says about Him, His character, or His actions.

Pierce also develops the theology behind several specific features of OT worship. For example, sacred spaces were a special place to meet with God and provided remembrance of and

focused attention on Him. The altar of incense represented the prayers of the people being offered up to God. The concepts of sacred time and sacred festivals drew people away from themselves and striving, and towards God and trust in Him; the sacred festivals were opportunities to thank God for His provision and deliverance, and to give to others. Through the major picture of atonement and the Day of Atonement, God showed how detrimental sin is to our relationship with and worship of Him. He also showed how far He was willing to go to bring atonement to those He loves. Through the sacrifices outlined in Leviticus, we see the importance in worship of surrender (the whole burnt offering), gratitude (the grain offering), fellowship (the peace offering), purity (the sin offering), and restitution (the guilt offering). In addition, the importance of worship from the heart was emphasized through the voluntary nature of the first three offerings.

Finally, Pierce ends Chapter 2 by looking at the NT; in Christ, the Old Covenant was fulfilled and the Law found perfection. His death and resurrection was the ultimate Day of Atonement. Moreover, Christ not only received the *death* we deserved, providing penal substitution for our sins, He also accomplished the *cleansing* we couldn't achieve, providing purification for our sins. The imagery is so rich in the Pentateuch of who we are in relation to God, close and yet separate; the problem of our sin is rightly portrayed as serious, and the stage is magnificently set for Christ, the Savior, to the glory and praise of God.

In Chapter 3 on the Former Prophets, Pierce first focuses on the importance of remembrance in worship. Stories of remembrance ("Ebenezer" referred to a *memorial* stone in I Sam. 7:12) cause us to remember God's acts, which promotes faith and worship. As an aside, a great NT example of remembrance is communion. However, memory can't replace relationship, which leads to idolatry, Pierce's next topic. In the Former Prophets, we see both physical idolatry, that is people seeking to replace God or see Him for themselves, and psychological idolatry, which is essentially focusing on the act of worship and ultimately ourselves instead of the One who alone is worthy of all worship. This sin is serious indeed, and it can be central to so much of how one desires to "do worship," as Pierce puts it. We need to remember that it is not *form* but humbly *submitting* to God's ways that will take us where we want to be. I need to remember this, and chapters 2 and 3 helped me do so.

Pierce also draws considerable attention to service and distinctiveness in worship. How well we can worship God in sacred time and space depends on how we serve in life. Also, being holy and set apart by God during the worship event necessitates that we live in distinction from the world. Saul's act of worship in I Sam. 15 was a failure because he did not connect the act to everything else (wrong) in his life. While service and distinctiveness portray God to the world, through prayer we are enabled to walk in this way. Prayer is so crucial in every area of life, notwithstanding worship. Pierce shows that the Israelites approached God in prayer based on His reputation (history), His promises, and His character, and we can do the same.

In Chapter 4, Pierce exposes the strong connections between worshipping God and practicing righteousness, and between action and attitude, in the Latter Prophets. Here, the connection between worship as event and lifestyle seems the strongest, with lifestyle (or attitude) emphasized over event (or action). Prophets like Jeremiah, Hosea, and Amos spoke out for treatment of the oppressed, mercy, and justice and righteousness, over acts of worship and sacrifice, which the Israelites were performing without their hearts engaged. In fact, Malachi addressed a people lacking in both attitude *and* action, which just goes to show that our actions will eventually follow our attitude. Malachi also called the Israelites to give their full tithe to God, as an act of worship and faith in God their provider, who would continue to fulfill His covenant with them.

Pierce also fills in the categories of what we bring to worship and what we take from worship. We bring an attitude to worship of humility before God, acknowledging who He is and then who we are, and willing to offer and submit to whatever He desires of us. We must also come in prayer, with confession and repentance as appropriate, as Hosea called for (Hosea 14:2). What we take from worship is an exchange with the Almighty God, a transformation; this may not always result in joy but may lead to lament, self-denial, or uneasiness. We may be called to a more substantial commitment to God's message and ministry, as Moses, Isaiah, and others were.

In Chapter 5, Pierce looks at expressions of worship through the Writings, especially Psalms. The functions of Psalms include teaching, lamenting, and praising. One of the key truths we learn there is that worship is where wisdom begins. That is, the fear of Yahweh as our proper

attitude of worship leads to experiencing God and then gaining knowledge of God, which is fundamental to finding wisdom. Through worship and wisdom we also recognize our place, as did Job when God replied to him (Job 38-39). One thing I appreciate about many of the psalms is how they incorporate instruction but do so through meditation, prayer, and praise, instead of legalism. I think this model also suggests to the worship leader or pastor that song lyrics need theology too.

There is so much more to say about Psalms. I find it quite interesting that the word “hallelujah,” which we use often in worship, was originally written as *Hallelu-Yah* (e.g., Ps. 104:35), where *Hallelu* is the imperative plural verb for “you must praise,” and *Yah* is a shortened version of Yahweh. I’m also impressed at the skill with which the psalmist interlaced both the horizontal and vertical aspects of worship, as Pierce points out. The many laments in Psalms are also significant, especially in our modern worship and Western cultures, where we tend to focus either exclusively on joy or avoid emotions altogether. There are also imprecatory psalms, driven by anger at sin and passion for God and His reign; songs of thanksgiving for God’s mighty acts (Ps. 30; 67; 92; 116; 118; 124); and hymns that focus more on His nature and character (Ps. 8 and 104 on creation of man; Ps. 113 on God’s might and mercy; Ps. 78 and 105 on God’s rule over history).

In the wisdom literature, specifically 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, we see the theme of unity in a postexilic Israel, which promoted and was expressed through worship, which in turn further strengthened the people’s unity. While the people were unified in purpose and around God, they expressed themselves with freedom, joy, and gratitude in worship, which was “liturgically framed and articulated and yet absent from a set pattern for how worship ought to be done.” This is a good note to end on as it is a call for all worshipers to focus on the God that unifies them and not the preferences and circumstances that would separate them.