

The Rejection and Rehabilitation of Worship in the Old Testament

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Throughout history, much of worship's role in revealed religion has been to give voice to the ineffable, form to the invisible, and outlet to the inexpressible. Worship is a conduit—not only to give God a way of revealing himself to his children, but to give those children a means whereby they can express themselves to God. Whether sacrificial offerings in ancient Israel or temple work in the Church today, liturgical forms and ritualistic practices have allowed the faithful to communicate their devotion to and reverence for God in ways that convert the internal and invisible into the external and discernible—providing embodiment for those heartfelt “groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26). True worship has always been a delicate balance between belief and behavior, in which sacraments and sentiments merge into one.

Of course, worship's outward actions and inward attitudes are not inherently coexistent. The presence of the first does not necessarily verify the reality of the second, as evidenced by the Lord's lament to both Isaiah and Joseph Smith that some who “draw near [him] . . . with their lips” have “hearts [that

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are] far from [him]" (Isaiah 29:13; Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Unfortunately, the very process of externalization sometimes substitutes for the true purposes of worship, until ritual becomes routinized and form supplants function. Thus debased, mere participation in worship often passes for true engagement with God, fooling some adherents into settling for outward compliance when inward conversion is required. More hollowed than hallowed, such empty exteriority leaves so-called worshippers following the "form of godliness," even while denying themselves "the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3:5; see also Joseph Smith—History 1:19). No wonder it is "true worshippers," as Jesus told the woman at the well, that the Father "seeketh," for harder to find than mere church-goers are those who truly "worship [God] in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23–24).

If finding true worship was something of a selective search when this New Testament conversation took place, the same could be said of the Old Testament history which precedes it. The same Samaritan woman, for example, defined her ancestors' worship in terms of place rather than piety and described Jewish worship in the same light (see John 4:20), as if location had become more important than intent. Indeed, throughout much of the Old Testament text, in which Israelite worship entailed a complex assemblage of sacrificial rites and elaborate rituals, whenever prophets cautioned Israel against mistaking worship's external means for its internal ends, they were sounding a familiar theme, one that constitutes the subject of this study. In examining this issue, I will show, first, that much of the worship decried as degenerate in the pages of the Old Testament entailed Israel losing sight of worship's inner purposes while remaining active in its outer forms. Second, I will argue that in order to rehabilitate Israelite worship internally, God often rejected it externally. At times literally, though more often rhetorically, God frequently stripped away the external forms to reveal the lack of internal function, reenthroning the inner purposes of worship by calling into question the outer practices such ritual entailed. In doing so, God also pointed worshippers forward to a time of even greater internalization to come, one embodied in the new covenant of Jesus Christ.

True Worship: "An Outward Expression of an Inner Commitment"

With the law of Moses determining the worship patterns throughout most of the Old Testament text, it is an easy mistake to assign outer form to the Old Testament and inner faith to the New Testament. The law was,

after all, a system of external “performances and ordinances,” as the Book of Mormon repeatedly attests (see 2 Nephi 25:30; Mosiah 13:30; Alma 30:23; 4 Nephi 1:12), and it was administered under Aaronic authority with its keys concerning “outward ordinances [and] the letter of the gospel” (D&C 107:20). However, like the unfair oversimplification that assigns justice to the Old Testament and mercy to the New Testament, this approach ignores the interiority of worship emphasized long before the Savior came to fulfill the Mosaic law. Adam and Eve were not engaged in the “outward ordinance” of sacrifice for long before they received an inner understanding of its significance and symbolism (see Moses 5:5–8). Cain’s offering—though outwardly compliant in some sense—was rejected because it was devoid of an inward faith.¹ The people of Enoch’s Zion, while well versed in visible rituals of “water, and blood, and the spirit,” were defined more by their internal oneness of heart and mind (Moses 6:59; see also 7:18). Even Moses, whose law has become synonymous with external forms and ritual practices, was far more intent on “sanctify[ing] his people” internally, “that they might behold the face of God” (D&C 84:23). Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed, “Real, personal sacrifice”—one of the most visible forms of worship at the time—“never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a willingness to put the animal in us upon the altar and letting it be consumed!”² In short, throughout Old Testament history, worship was meant to be what signs and sacraments have always been: “an outer expression of an inner commitment.”³

Old Testament prophets, therefore, taught the external with an eye to the internal, pointing their people to the spirit by upholding the letter. They knew, as did the Apostle Paul, that “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly, . . . but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly,” whose worship “is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter” (Romans 2:28–29). Thus Jeremiah prophesied of a “law in their inward parts” (Jeremiah 31:33), and Ezekiel wrote of “a new spirit . . . within” (Ezekiel 36:26). Old Testament-era prophets in the Americas were even more explicit, “teaching the law of Moses, *and the intent for which it was given*” (Jarom 1:11; emphasis added), such that the Nephites could simultaneously “keep the law of Moses” (the external) and “look forward to the coming of Christ” (the internal) (Alma 25:15). With such a forward-looking faith in Christ, worshippers could be given outward “performances and ordinances” with the counsel to look through them rather than looking to them, as was the case with the serpent Moses fashioned of

brass. It was not the brazen serpent as object but as symbol that allowed the stricken Israelites to look and live, and that symbol pointed both forward to Jesus Christ and inward to the requisite acceptance of his sacrifice. As Nephi, son of Helaman, explained, the outward action of looking had to be accompanied by a pair of inward qualifiers: they had to look “with faith” while “having a contrite spirit” (Helaman 8:15).

Perhaps true worship—in the Old Testament era as well as in any other age—can therefore be summarized as follows: Worship is not merely something we do, but something we do because of something we feel about something we believe. And of those elements—doing, feeling, and believing—doing, while important, is the least imperative of the three. Thus Abraham’s interrupted offering of Isaac “was accounted to him for righteousness” (Galatians 3:6) even without the actual act of sacrifice. Abraham proved what he felt about what he believed, and that was sufficient. That was worship. In fact, the first time the word worship appears in the King James Version of the Bible is in Abraham’s statement concerning what he and his son were going up to Mount Moriah to do (see Genesis 22:5).⁴ Obviously, the outward expression Abraham was initially commanded to perform was never completed, but only because his true acts of worship had already occurred. As the angel reassured him, “Now I know that thou fearest God” (Genesis 22:12). In short, Abraham had “bowed down” internally, and offered the sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. His external hand was stayed because his internal heart was right. Compare this to the external obedience of Laman and Lemuel, who did in fact follow their father into the wilderness, making, at least in the technical sense, the same sacrifice as their brothers—indeed, in Laman’s case, making a greater sacrifice, since his inheritance would have been a birthright double-portion. Unfortunately for Laman and Lemuel, however, and in contradistinction to the example of Abraham, absent from the story of their sacrifice is the inward-pointing adverb that typically accompanies acceptable offerings: they did not do it “willingly.”⁵ Though not an instance of worship in the ritual sense, the same principle applies to their outward offering. What they did was not an outgrowth of how they felt about what they believed. It was in no way an act of true worship.

False Worship: “An Outward Expression Devoid of Inner Commitment”

As a record of God’s dealings with his chosen people and their covenant relationship with him, the Old Testament is replete with powerful examples of the kind of willing obedience, deep devotion, and heartfelt faith that constitute true worship.⁶ Even during a time of gross idolatry, when Elijah worried that he alone was left a righteous worshipper, God reminded him that there were still seven thousand others who had not “bowed unto Baal” (1 Kings 19:14–18). This prevalence of true worship, as well as those righteous exceptions whenever wickedness became the rule, should be kept in mind as we turn our attention to the accounts of false worship that also abound in the Old Testament, accounts that can generally be categorized into three overlapping types. First are the Old Testament’s frequent references to Asherah and Baal, the false gods of Egypt or Babylon, or the groves and high places honored by the apostate kings of Israel and Judah. A second type of false worship entails the willful neglect of true worship, times when some in Israel “despised mine holy things, and . . . profaned my sabbaths” (Ezekiel 22:8) or allowed themselves to “forget my holy mountain” (Isaiah 65:11). The third form of false worship (the focus of this study) is more subtle and therefore more insidious than these examples of blatant idolatry and willful disregard—those involving external compliance devoid of internal commitment. To borrow more modern terms, the problem did not have to be one of apostasy or inactivity, but lack of interiority.

This inward defiance hidden behind outward compliance accounts not only for Laman and Lemuel’s halfhearted obedience mentioned earlier, but more significantly, for their wholehearted defense of the unrepentant people of Jerusalem—friends and neighbors whom they accused their prophet father of judging incorrectly. “We know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people,” Laman and Lemuel affirmed defensively, “for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, *according to the law of Moses*” (1 Nephi 17:22; emphasis added). In this revealing comment, we see Laman and Lemuel’s perspective on what constituted obedience to the law of Moses (a view most likely shared by those who remained in Jerusalem), and by implication, their view of worship: it was tied, in their minds, to ritual sacrifice rather than love of God and neighbor. It seems that they had separated the law’s internal intangibles from its external

expressibles and assumed that compliance with the latter would compensate for an absence of the former. In other words, Laman and Lemuel had observed the “performances and ordinances” taking place without fail in Jerusalem and assumed that obeying the law of Moses entailed little else. As long as they complied with the legalistic outer requirements of the law, its moralistic inner elements might be safely underemphasized.

Malachi identified this type of inner apostasy when he accused Israel’s priests of despising the Lord’s name. “Wherein have we despised thy name?” the priests protested. By offering “polluted bread upon mine altar,” the Lord replied. Again in mock protest they asked, “Wherein have we polluted thee?” In their minds they were performing the required rituals, worshipping at the altar as expected. But as Malachi revealed, their outer observance betrayed an inner contempt, for they were offering the blind, the lame, and the sick for sacrifice when only the unblemished were acceptable to God. “Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it!” the Lord continued, “and ye snuffed at it.” It is true, the Lord admitted, that “ye brought an offering,” but “should I accept this of your hand?” Why “kindle fire on mine altar for nought[?] I have no pleasure in you, saith the Lord of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand” (Malachi 1:6–8, 10, 13), for it was never an offering of their hearts.⁷

This artificial obedience was not a priestly problem in Malachi’s day alone. Centuries earlier the same had been true of Eli’s sons Hophni and Phinehas, who “abhorred the offering of the Lord” even while administering it (1 Samuel 2:17; see also 1 Samuel 2:13–16, 22, 29). It was not that they offered sacrifices to false gods or abandoned sacrifice altogether, but the offerings, taken “by force” (1 Samuel 2:16), were not offered in faith. They maintained their post “at the door of the tabernacle,” but their actions there were adulterated, in more ways than one (1 Samuel 2:22). Morally bankrupt within, Hophni and Phinehas mistakenly maintained some level of confidence in God’s companionship because of their continued participation in the visible trappings of Israelite religion.

A focus on the tangible in the days of Hophni and Phinehas led some to the false assumption that the power of God remained with Israel merely because the vessels of God were in their possession, as best evidenced by their misplaced trust in the ark at the expense of the covenant. Having been defeated by the Philistines at Aphek—a loss their false sense of security made difficult to explain—the elders of Israel decided, “Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it

may save us out of the hand of our enemies” (1 Samuel 4:3). Notice their assumption that “it,” the ark, would save them, as opposed to faith that he, God, would deliver them. In other words, they mistook the symbol for the source and the object for the agent. The men of Israel were no better, for when they saw the ark among them, along with the presence of their priests, Hophni and Phinehas, the men of Israel shook the earth with their shouts of self-assurance. On the other side of the battlefield, meanwhile, the Philistines showed the same mistaken trust in the tangible: hearing the shouts of their opponents, “they understood that the ark of the Lord was come into the camp” and cried fearfully, “God is come into the camp . . . the Gods that smote the Egyptians” (1 Samuel 4:3–8; emphasis added).

While there may have been some in either camp still able to distinguish between *signified* and *signifier*, these verses suggest that in the eyes of many Israelites and Philistines, the ark was Israel’s graven God, and its presence alone ensured victory. Thus, when the battle ended, the Philistines celebrated the ark’s capture and the Israelites mourned its loss. In fact, textually, the entire narrative centers on the ark’s physical presence. During the battle, Eli’s “heart trembled for the ark of God,” with no mention made of his two sons who accompanied it. When a messenger returned to Eli with news, he ordered his report in increasing degrees of disaster: the retreat of the army, the slaughter of the people, the death of Hophni and Phinehas, and, last and apparently worst, the news that “the ark of God is taken.” As devastating as each of those four news flashes was (especially the third, one would think), it was only “when he made mention of the ark of God” that Eli “fell from off the seat backward” and died. Moments later, the news reached Eli’s daughter-in-law, and again the ark is given pride of place. The “tidings that the ark of God was taken” was the first report that registered, and naming her newborn Ichabod—meaning “Where is the glory?”—as she lay dying, she bemoaned Israel’s loss of glory in terms that made the deaths of her father-in-law and husband seem like secondary sorrows. “The glory is departed from Israel: because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father in law and her husband. And [again] she said, The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken” (1 Samuel 4:10–22). Subsequently, when the Philistines installed the ark in the temple of their own god, Dagon, a contest between the two images ensued, followed by a seven-month tour of devastation in the wake of the Israelite ark. Passed around Philistia like a hot potato, it was eventually returned to the people

from whom it was taken (1 Samuel 5–6), having dramatized the danger of treating as an outward trophy what was meant to be a token of inward covenants. From start to finish, this was not a story of reverence for Israel's God, but reliance on an object meant to symbolize him. Not unlike the golden calf of their ancestors, the ark became for some merely an object of affection, one that was literally lost in battle in order to illustrate a more significant loss that had already occurred—the loss of the interior attitudes that truly herald the presence of God.

No wonder young Samuel grew to distinguish between such inner attributes as obedience and such outer actions as sacrifice (see 1 Samuel 15:22). No wonder he bemoaned Israel's confidence in a visible king and their lack of faith in an invisible God (see 1 Samuel 8:6–22). No wonder he was able to discern the heart by looking past “the outward appearance” (1 Samuel 16:7). Others in Israel were often not so discerning. As Isaiah lamented, many in his day were “called by the name of Israel, and [were] come forth out of the waters of Judah,” but did not act “in truth, nor in righteousness.” As was often the case, they mistook identity for integrity. Word and ritual had told them who they were, but they had not internalized those acts of worship. They “call[ed] themselves of the holy city,” but could not be called holy themselves (Isaiah 48:1–2). As God had told Isaiah earlier, many in Israel had all of the objects—eyes, ears, and hearts—but none of the abilities required to see, hear, and feel (see Isaiah 6:9–10).

The prophet Jeremiah directed similar words to the people of his day (see Jeremiah 5:21), for they had similar problems internalizing the attitudes and attributes that worship's external forms were meant to engender. In fact, beyond echoing Isaiah, Jeremiah also alluded to the formalism of Eli's day discussed earlier, drawing a parallel between his people's trust in the temple at Jerusalem and Israel's earlier trust in the ark at Shiloh. “Trust ye not,” he warned, “in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these.” The mere presence of the ark had not delivered Israel in Eli's day, and the mere presence of the temple would not deliver Judah in Jeremiah's.⁸ Those who doubted the prophet's words were invited, “Go ye now unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.” The people in both periods felt “delivered to do all these abominations” because they could always, at least outwardly, “come and stand before

[God] in [his] house.” Therefore, to eliminate the empty assurance derived from outward expressions devoid of inner commitments, both Shiloh and Jerusalem were destroyed. As God warned the people through Jeremiah, “Therefore will I do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, . . . as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight” (Jeremiah 7:4–15). Perhaps to make it even more obvious that no amount of external worship would compensate for their lack of internal worthiness, the Lord then commanded Jeremiah, “Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee” (Jeremiah 7:16).

Rejection of the External

Whether embodied in torn-down temples, captured vessels, broken relics, or even ages of apostasy, the literal destruction of Israelite worship would have been dramatic indeed. However, the Old Testament’s rhetorical rejection of hollow formalism is in some ways equally striking. Consider the Lord’s forceful words as recorded by Amos: “I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts” (Amos 5:21–22). An even more eloquent example comes from the prophet Isaiah, who both began and ended his prophesying with rhetorical rejections of worship that had grown disingenuous. The first chapter includes a protracted denunciation worth quoting at length, in which the Lord asks the following:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.

When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts?

Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.

Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.

And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. (Isaiah 1:11–15)

In this scathing rebuke, the Lord rejects what he had once required—more accurately, he rejects the people’s artificial observance of what should have been worship’s true forms. Israel’s oblations were vain, their offerings an abomination. Evidently they were still engaging in these ritual behaviors, but God refused to accept them. By the end of the book of Isaiah, God’s words of rejection are some of his most forceful: “He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine’s blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol.” In summary, he concludes, “They have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations” (Isaiah 66:3).⁹

Rhetorically, there may be no more graphic rejection of the ritualistic worship practices of ancient Israel.¹⁰ On the one hand, throughout this string of comparisons are prescribed acts of worship: the sacrificing of an ox or a lamb, the offering of an oblation, or the burning of incense. But paired with each practice is its equivalent as perceived by an offended God, each one suggesting the height of idolatry and degradation.¹¹ Dogs were seen as an abomination in Israel; few things would have been considered as unclean as the blood of swine (see Deuteronomy 23:18; Leviticus 11:7); and idols had been forbidden at least since the days of Sinai. But devoid of the faith that made true ritual worshipful, Israel’s animal sacrifices were no better than human sacrifice or even murder. As an early scholar said of such language, “Nothing could more emphatically express the detestation of God for the spirit with which they would make their offerings.”¹²

Within these two passages of Isaiah—the bookends of his volume—we see the rhetorical rejection of worship as known and practiced by many in ancient Israel and Judah.¹³ We also see where these people had gone wrong in their worship and how true worship was intended to make things right. In the earlier passage, Isaiah asks two questions that lie at the heart of the issue. The first (“To what purpose?”) asks the *why* and the second (“Who hath required this?”) asks the *who* (Isaiah 1:11, 12). With regard to the first, even while remaining compliant with the *what* of worship—its outward forms and visible gestures—Isaiah’s audience had lost sight of the reason those actions

were required. Jeremiah asked similarly, “To what purpose cometh there to me incense . . .? your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me” (Jeremiah 6:20). By its very nature, ritual is susceptible to the charge of “vain repetition” that Jesus condemned in the praying habits of the heathen (see Matthew 6:7). The purpose behind such repetitive acts must therefore be constantly kept in mind. Otherwise, such outward repetitiveness will indeed become vain, which, depending on the meaning one chooses for that word, leaves it either ineffective or self-centered. Either way, whether purposeless or proud, such so-called worship loses its power by losing its aim, a frequent problem among those for whom worship has become ritual monotony. Each instance becomes a sad illustration of the aphorism of H. W. Schneider: “Beliefs seldom become doubts; they become ritual.”¹⁴

As for the question of *who*, at times the people of Israel were quick to rejoice in the blessings of God but slow to acknowledging the source. As Isaiah lamented, even farm animals know who provides for them, “but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider” (Isaiah 1:3). Like the Nephites condemned by Samuel the Lamanite, they did “not remember the Lord [their] God in the things with which he ha[d] blessed [them].” They “always remember[ed]” their blessings, but “not to thank the Lord [their] God for them” (Helaman 13:22). Under such circumstances, acts of worship can be dutifully performed without becoming personally directed, leaving ritual devoid of any feeling toward God. Habakkuk likened such disengaged worshippers to fishermen who “catch [fish] in their net, and gather them in their drag” only to “sacrifice unto their net, and burn incense unto their drag” instead of rendering thanks and praise unto God (Habakkuk 1:15–16). Even when counting their blessings Israel sometimes honored the visible and tangible *instruments* rather than the invisible and intangible *instrumentality* of God.

But to what degree is the *what* of worship affected by the absence of its requisite *why* and *who*? As the passage in Isaiah 66:3 makes clear, purposeless worship is not merely a neutral endeavor, but a negative one. Isaiah equates it with serious sin, not mere ignorance or indecision. Describing similar halfheartedness, Mormon at first dismisses it as simply ineffectual—“except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing”—but immediately intensifies his judgment to condemn it as an actual wrong. “It [is] counted *evil*,” he warns, to engage in such acts “and not with real intent” (Moroni 7:6–9; emphasis added). Similarly, after the brother of Jared endured his three-hour chastening for an

offense as simple as neglected prayer, he “repented of the *evil* which he had done” in forgetting God (Ether 2:15; emphasis added).

If forgetting God by neglecting worship is considered evil, then forgetting God while engaging in worship adds an element of hypocrisy to that sin. A measure of mercy therefore exists in the rejection of such ritual, for it helps remove that hypocritical aspect. Gone is the external veneer behind which to hide. Also eliminated is the false sense of security that comes from outward-only obedience. In the absence of worship’s exterior forms, what would have come of Laman and Lemuel’s overconfidence in their countrymen’s outward compliance with the law of Moses? Who would have followed Hophni and Phinehas if they had had no observable ordinances with which to “cover [their] sins” (D&C 121:37)? Allowing formalism to continue uncorrected would only lull Israel into thinking that their outward obedience could substitute for inner adoration, and therefore the external had to be removed—either literally or rhetorically—in order to lay bare the internal (or its absence). The reality had to match the perception. An empty Holy of Holies in Eli’s day bore witness to the emptiness of worship that took place there. A temple destroyed by Babylon mirrored a devotional life that had been overrun by the cares of the world. Returning to the Lord’s words in Isaiah’s first chapter, God simply gave voice to Israel’s true feelings: he saw no purpose in their sacrifices because Israel had lost its purpose in performing them; he took no delight in their offerings because they found no delight in their gifts; he was weary with their holy days because the feasts were a weariness to them. In rejecting the outward appearance of piety, God placed his people before a mirror that reached within. Similar rhetorical work is accomplished in Isaiah 3, where the apostate daughters of Zion are likewise shown their true reflection: not the well-dressed, perfumed beauty they saw on the surface, but the ill-clad, putrid ugliness that an all-seeing God perceived within (see Isaiah 3:24). In essence, like the “whited sepulchers” in Jesus’ rebuke (see Matthew 23:27), Isaiah was turning these daughters of Zion inside-out, making bare the inner reality in an externally visible way.

In times of empty, insincere worship, because Israel had in effect come to assume an equivalence between the external and the internal, with the visible standing in for the invisible, God concretized their assumption to prove it false. Whereas Israelite worship evinced a high degree of exteriority, with the assumption that its interiority would be judged as being on the same level, God knew the true level of its interiority and brought down its exteriority to be in line. In

short, Israel hoped that both sides would be deemed equally visible; God proved that both were equally invisible. Israel hoped the internal would be judged by the external; God made sure that it would. By rejecting worship's outer forms, God left Israel to face its inner inclinations, and without the crutch of superficial sacrifice or the veneer of hypocritical praise, Israel stood in a position to honestly look inward and truly repent.

Rehabilitation of the Internal

In a way, the process of rehabilitation through rejection mirrors the fall and rise of buildings, communities, or civilizations. When the old structure has been abandoned and allowed to decay, its hollow exterior eventually crumbles or is torn down, clearing the ground for a new foundation to be laid and a new structure to be built and inhabited. Isaiah seems to suggest this process when he follows his diatribe against hollow temple worship in chapter 1 with the promise of a new "mountain of the Lord's house" in chapter 2.¹⁵ In worship, the order of this rehabilitation typically follows the order in which worship was meant to arise in the first place—an emphasis on the internal, the spiritual, and the relational, which then gives meaning to the forms of devotion that give it visible shape and experiential regularity. Continued engagement in the external then allows for greater understanding and internalization, provided that the original emphases are not lost in the process. In other words, what we feel gives rise to what we do, and in turn, what we do gives structure to what we feel.

An inner-oriented type of worship seems to have been God's original intention, before its spirit became entangled in the letter of ritual complexity. As Moses reminded his people, the reason they "saw no manner of similitude" at Sinai was because the Lord feared they would "corrupt [them]selves, and make [themselves] a graven image." Moses then listed three verses of potential externalities that the Israelites may have been prone to employ as an outward symbol of—or worse, a substitute for—the true God (Deuteronomy 4:15–19). Thus it was not only the law (with its prohibition of graven images) but also the manner in which it was given that was meant to counter that inclination. God chose to remain invisible to them in that instance, and thereby pointed Israel inward, both to inner worship and to an emphasis on the inner attributes of God and the inner principles of his redemptive plan. Jeremiah recalled this order—the spiritual before the physical—in his lament, discussed

earlier, that Judah's unmerited trust in the temple would prove no more effective than Israel's trust in the ark of the covenant. "I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people" (Jeremiah 7:22–23). In other words, inner obedience was the original end, with outer ordinances the superadded means. The shell meant nothing without the core. Without inner righteousness and real intent, Jeremiah suggests, they might as well eat their sacrificial offerings themselves.¹⁶

Jesus similarly turned to the Old Testament to privilege internal ends over external means. Twice when dealing with certain Pharisees—often presented as the personification of the external devoid of the internal in Jesus' day—the Lord quoted Hosea's words to ancient Israel, "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6; see Matthew 9:13 and 12:7). Micah acknowledged this dichotomy as well when questioning the sufficiency of outward offerings: "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Recognizing the insufficiency of these physical manifestations, Micah eventually settled on the offering God really requires: "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:6–8).¹⁷

Like Hosea and Micah, Isaiah likewise elevated attributes over actions. He addressed the issue at length in his description of "the fast that I have chosen" (see Isaiah 58), but perhaps his most powerful treatment of this concept appears in his final chapter, in the verses leading up to the scathing rejection, discussed earlier, of Israelite offerings as swine's blood. "Thus saith the Lord," Isaiah begins, "The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." Compared to this universal creation, "where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?" (Isaiah 66:1). Echoing Solomon's lament of centuries earlier, Isaiah wonders what the temple—if devoid of empowering authenticity—could possibly mean to a Being that even the "heaven of heavens cannot contain" (1 Kings 8:27). "For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the Lord: but to this man

will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). In essence, Isaiah is asking his people to consider what good their physical offerings are to God when they all came from God to begin with. By asking for a portion of those offerings in worshipful return, what God was really seeking was the interest on that investment—an increase in the gratitude, love, and reverence those gifts were meant to convey. Like the bulging fishnets abandoned by the Savior's apostles, it was the Lord who had filled them in the first place, a gift given that they might have something to offer in return. Their real gift was the faith and submissiveness their sacrifice embodied, the external providing proof of the internal. Returning to Isaiah's words, what God really requires in worship is what he cannot create himself ("all those things hath mine hand made"), something that does not already exist ("all those things have been"), namely, a person who is "poor and of a contrite spirit"—an independent offering, born of agency, of uniquely human creation. Such willing submission is, in Elder Neal A. Maxwell's oft-quoted words, "really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God's altar," everything else being only what "He has already given or loaned to us."¹⁸ Borrowing again from Isaiah, if "Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering" (Isaiah 40:16), then what good is feigned faith or forced ritual observance? What God truly desires from us are expressions of realities within.

Conclusion

As history can attest, emphasizing outward expressions at the expense of inner commitments is a continual danger in any age, even after certain "performances and ordinances" were eclipsed by the Atonement of Christ. The Saints in Joseph Smith's day were warned against relying on "dead works" (D&C 22), and later, they still needed clarifying revelation to teach them "how to worship" and "what [to] worship" (D&C 93:19). Their struggles in Missouri suggest that some relied too much on Zion-as-place—like Jerusalem or Shiloh anciently—and neglected becoming Zion-as-people. Much more recently, during the first general conference held in the much-anticipated Conference Center in Salt Lake City in April 2000, President Boyd K. Packer asked, "Do you think it possible for those of us who are called upon to speak to draw attention away from this wonderful building long enough to focus on the purpose for which it was built?"¹⁹

Indeed, the Saints are still seeking the proper balance between outer forms and inner feelings, and God is still seeking those who will “worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). As Elder Donald L. Hallstrom of the Seventy recently observed, we still sometimes allow external activity in the Church to substitute for internal conversion to the gospel. As a result, he warned, “Many of us are not being regularly changed by [the] cleansing power [of outer ordinances] because of our lack of [inner] reverence.”²⁰ We must therefore continue striving to bend our wills as we bend our knees, to lift our hearts as we raise our hands, to “praise the Lord with heart [as well as] voice.”²¹ In short, we must worship God, not only in our external gestures, but, as the Psalmist said, “in the beauty of holiness” (Psalms 29:2; 96:9).

Eventually, that beautiful, holy worship will be such that no outward manifestation could possibly do it justice. As Jeremiah prophesied, “in those days, saith the Lord, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord: neither shall it come to mind: neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit it; neither shall that be done any more” (Jeremiah 3:16). Or as Isaiah foretold, “At that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. And he shall not look to the altars” (Isaiah 17:7–8), even those dedicated in service to God. By then, as John the Revelator was shown, the righteous who worshipped the Lamb pre-mortally will do so again (see Revelation 5:8–14; 19:1–6), but with no need for tangible temples, “for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb [will be] the temple” where they dwell (Revelation 21:22). In the meantime, we would be wise to learn from the Old Testament to engage in the outward but with our focus on the inward, until worship becomes an unaffected externalization of our love, faith, and reverence for God—a means by which our soul can speak when we “cannot say the smallest part which [we] feel” (Alma 26:16). If we come to know God and reverence him at that depth, our worship will naturally break through to the surface—an eruption occasionally, as when “David danced before the Lord with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14), but more often a spring, like the one of which Jesus spoke to a would-be worshipper in his day, “a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

Notes

1. Genesis 4:3–5. See *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 2:15–16.

2. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 1995, 91.

3. This phrase has been used by numerous writers from various faiths to describe the visible forms of religious experience. Perhaps the most famous Latter-day Saint instance is Elder Carlos E. Asay’s use of the phrase to describe the temple garment. See Carlos E. Asay, “The Temple Garment: ‘An Outward Expression of an Inward Commitment,’” *Ensign*, August 1997, 18–23.

4. The Hebrew word translated in this verse as “worship” appears earlier in the book of Genesis twice (see Genesis 18:2; 19:1), but is translated as “bow down” in both instances, and is not a “bowing down” before God, but before other messengers.

5. The expectation that sacrifice be “willing” appears frequently in the Old Testament text. See Exodus 25:2; Judges 5:2, 9; 1 Chronicles 28:9, 21; 2 Chronicles 17:16; 35:8; Ezra 3:5; 7:16. Significantly, the most notable examples of willingness in sacrifice concerned the building of the tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon, as shown in Exodus 25 and 1 Chronicles 29, respectively. In the first instance, the word “willing” appears five times; in the second, it appears seven times.

6. For an excellent discussion of these more positive examples of ritual worship in the Old Testament, see Carol Frogley Ellertson, “The Sanctifying Power of True Ritual Worship,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament, the 38th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 86–108.

7. Rex C. Reeve Jr. briefly treats these verses in his discussion of Malachi during the 1986 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament, observing, as I have, that “Israel’s lack of reverence and their polluted sacrifices caused God to reject them.” Rex C. Reeve Jr., “Malachi and the Latter Days,” in *The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints* (Orem, UT: Randall Book, 1986), 310.

8. Ellis Rasmussen said of these verses, “They [the temple worshippers] could not assume that by going to the temple and making perfunctory sacrifices in it, they could be excused from repenting. They must learn to do good and cease to do evil. They must not make the temple ‘a den of robbers’ and hope to hide in it, thinking it would not be destroyed.” *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 547.

9. For an alternate translation of this verse and a discussion of the possibility that it ties Israel’s legitimate offerings to pagan sacrifice, see Jack M. Sasson, “Isaiah LXVI 3–4a,” *Vetus Testamentum* 26, no. 2 (April 1976): 199–207.

10. The strong rhetoric in these verses has even led some scholars to wonder if the author is rejecting the temple outright. See Wim Beuken, “Does Trito-Isaiah Reject the Temple? An Intertextual Inquiry into Isa. 66. 1–6,” in Sipke Draisma, ed., *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel* (Kampen, Netherlands: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1989), 53–66. Latter-day Saint scholars would see in this text a less sweeping rejection: “The old rituals, so often

hypocritically performed, will be done away, and they who have only such worship to their credit shall suffer the consequences.” Rasmussen, *Latter-day Saint Commentary*, 539.

11. A group of Latter-day Saint scholars said of these verses, “The parallels in this verse illustrate how men may outwardly appear to worship Jehovah while in reality continuing their sinful ways, whether outwardly or in their hearts (James 3:9–10). Certainly the Lord wants our sacrifices, the outward signs of our devotion. But he also wants us to understand that outward symbols are empty without the inward devotions: obedience, repentance, humility, gratitude (1:11 – 13).” Donald W. Parry, Jay A. Parry, and Tina M. Peterson, *Understanding Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 584.

12. Albert Barnes, *Notes, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical, on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 2 (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1853), 439.

13. Many scholars agree that Isaiah 1 “recapitulates themes found throughout Isaiah, and that it runs parallel thematically and linguistically with the final chapters of the book,” specifically, “the diatribe against the sacrificial cult.” See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 19, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 181.

14. Herbert Wallace Schneider, *The Puritan Mind* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930), 98.

15. For an extended discussion of this comparison, see Francis Landy, “Torah and Anti-Torah: Isaiah 2:2–4 and 1:10–26,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11, nos. 3–4 (January 2003): 317–34.

16. This sense is clearer in translations other than the King James Version. The New International Version, for example, translates Jeremiah 7:21 as follows: “Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves!”

17. In the 1986 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament, Monte S. Nyman similarly noted Micah’s elevation of inner attributes over “the ritual of the law,” and linked this text to Isaiah’s words in Isaiah 1 and Abinadi’s words in Mosiah 13. See Monte S. Nyman, “Micah, the Second Witness with Isaiah,” in *The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints* (Orem, UT: Randall Book, 1986), 219, 222.

18. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 1995, 30.

19. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2000, 6.

20. Donald L. Hallstrom, “Converted to His Gospel through His Church,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 13–15.

21. Tracy Y. Cannon, “Praise the Lord with Heart and Voice,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 73.