

# Ritualized Prostration in the New Testament

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One of the prominent and recurring actions within sections of the New Testament is the “falling at the feet,” the “falling on the ground,” or the “worship” before someone, in most cases either God or Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Generally identified as a form of prostration, most of the cases of this action are signified by the usage of the Greek word *proskuneō*, though other words are also used to describe the same type of action. This action, while culturally, socially, and politically significant in the ancient world and in many cultures in the modern world, strikes Western (particularly American) audiences as odd, strange, or foreign. This strangeness is largely a function of the fact that Western cultures have developed, adopted, and accepted differing norms for the expression of social and religious messages and values. This chapter will elucidate the usage of the action of ritual prostration within the New Testament world by, first, establishing certain methods for the understanding of rituals and ritualized action and, second, comparing and contextualizing the connection and dependence of prostration in the New Testament with its precedents in the Old Testament. This chapter will then move beyond these to analyze the usage of the words of prostration in order to appreciate the ways prostration was utilized in New Testament times and by the authors of the New Testament in their respective works.

## Understanding Rituals and Ritualized Action in Scriptural Texts

To understand what ritualized prostration may have meant and why it appears so prevalently in both the Old and New Testaments, it is necessary to think more broadly about ritual actions within human societies. Every culture and religious system has its set of ritual actions—whether called “ordinances,” “sacraments,” or something else—that fill an important role. Beyond distinctly religious ritual actions, every community is likewise undergirded by a variety of more common ritual actions that assist in communication between individuals within that community and with individuals of other communities. Such ritual actions can change over time, their importance within society ebbing and flowing or being replaced outright by other (similar or completely different) rituals. Such rituals can also be used in many different ways depending on the message that participants wish to send. Consider, for instance, the handshake. While being a basic ritual of greeting and extending polite overtures of friendliness, it can also send a variety of different social messages if done in a different way: it can be simply formulaic or without feeling, it can be warm and inviting, or it can be cold and vapid. It can be embellished and expanded with the addition of other ritualized actions (embraces, back-patting, shoulder-gripping, elaborate series of hand slaps and motions, and so forth). Its deliberate omission sends messages of offense, while overdoing it (e.g., squeezing too hard with the hand) can act as a passive-aggressive means of asserting superiority. Or it may not be the norm at all, with other ritual actions—for instance, bowing of the head in many contemporary Eastern cultures—filling the same social need (though obviously also differing in import and message). In any case, such a simple physical gesture can be seen as an intensely complex interaction, with the potential for a vast amount of social and symbolic messaging and signification encoded in a simple physical gesture. Yet, despite its complexity, most messages are readily apparent to all of us. They go without being said. We can automatically understand their importance and interpret them largely correctly. Beyond that, we unconsciously assume that others are able to read such messages clearly as well. However, such an assumption is not always warranted, as someone from one culture may not automatically understand the nuances of messages sent by specific actions related to handshakes in another culture.

Such is the case for prostration in the ancient world. Mostly foreign to modern Western audiences, prostration (or the variety of physical postures that could fit under such an umbrella term), as an intentionally ritualized action, sent specific messages about the social interaction taking place. However, without proper contextualization and understanding of its place within the society of the New Testament and its authors, modern audiences might struggle to appreciate or fully understand the social interactions taking place. In the last few decades, ritual studies as a scholarly and academic field has arisen as a way of studying and presenting methods for the analysis of these complex interactions.<sup>2</sup>

The ritual action of prostration in the biblical world can most effectively be classified as a ritual of exchange or communion, meaning a ritual action in which an individual either presents a request or simply seeks to engage with or demonstrate dependency with the

object of the prostration (most often God, but also other humans).<sup>3</sup> While in some cases prostration is being used in other ways, the majority of the cases in both the Old and New Testaments are used in this way.<sup>4</sup> While we can assume this represents how prostration appeared in the culture and context of ancient Israel, we must also remember that our analysis of the rituals can be complicated by the standard issues of dealing with ancient texts.<sup>5</sup> We must also recognize that in many cases biblical authors presume that their original audience automatically understood what they were presented: the significance went without being said. With this last thought in mind, we recognize that prostration in the New Testament and its world is dependent on and derived from the ways it was used in the Old Testament and its world.

### Contextualizing Prostration in the Old and New Testaments

Prostration in the Old Testament is largely represented by the word *yištaḥāweh/hištaḥāwah*, which appears 170 times in the Hebrew text.<sup>6</sup> This word is regularly understood to mean “to bow down”; however, its morphological stem form is rather irregular within Biblical Hebrew, potentially affecting notions of what the term originally meant and how it was understood.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the case may be regarding its etymological development, what is clear about the term is that “the unusual shape of the word hints at its extraordinary cultural significance.”<sup>8</sup> This word is also translated as “worship” in many, but not all, cases in the King James Version.<sup>9</sup> However, a focus on the “inward attitude” or “worship” aspects of prostration does not fully represent the range of situations and purposes of *hištaḥāwah* in the biblical text, something also noted in the usage of *proskuneō* in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup> While the majority of usages of *hištaḥāwah* (68 percent) are directed toward Deity or other numinous personages, a significant minority of its usages (32 percent) are directed at other mortals.<sup>11</sup> The distinction between mortal or numinous objects forms the major characteristic that interpreters and translators use to distinguish between prostration as worship or veneration and prostration as social or hierarchical homage or honoring. However, the same word is used in both cases, and it should not be assumed that the earliest authors and audiences necessarily always made a distinction between the two uses. Indeed, there are a couple of instances in which the division between mortal and numinous recipients is deliberately obscured, with prostration done simultaneously to the king and to God (1 Chronicles 29:20 and Psalm 45:11).

No single characteristic or element dominates the literary presentation of prostration in the Old Testament. Rather, the usage of this term, befitting the large-scale diachronic development of the Old Testament (i.e., the fact that the contents of the Bible were written across hundreds of years, in many different locations, by different authors, in different contexts, for different purposes), can only be seen as quite variegated, representing a multivalent perspective on its meaning and purpose, as it appears in many different contexts.<sup>12</sup> As such, there are many different ways one can analyze prostration and its uses.<sup>13</sup> Herein, we will focus only on its ritual character, its directionality, and certain literary aspects connected to those characteristics.

As noted, the major category of ritual into which most of the examples of prostration in the Old Testament (84 percent) fall is that of rites of exchange or communion.<sup>14</sup> However, to truly represent how prostration was viewed, it is necessary to further subdivide this category, on the basis of the division presented above with prostration used with both numinous beings and other mortals as the object. In this case, 70 percent of the uses of prostration as a ritual of exchange or communion are directed toward numinous beings, while 30 percent are directed to other mortals. The conception of prostration throughout the composition of the Old Testament held fairly steady with the point that, as a ritual, prostration could be used as both a ritual of request or exchange with a mortal (mainly the king, but also others of high social standing) and a ritual of exchange and communion with God.<sup>15</sup>

## Analysis of Prostration in the New Testament

Relying on this basis for the use of prostration culturally and religiously in the Old Testament, the New Testament authors also prominently place prostration as a meaningful action relaying specific sociocultural and religiopolitical messages to their original audiences. As mentioned, these messages are largely presented via the term *proskuneō* (“to worship, pay homage, show reverence; to prostrate”). However, there are also a number of other terms that present the same type of action. These words, not appearing anywhere as often as *proskuneō*, include *piptō* (“to fall, collapse; to bow down; to die”), *katapiptō* (“to fall down”), and *gonupeteō* (“to fall upon one’s knees, to kneel before”).<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Gospels, it appears in some instances the author’s word choice was deliberate to change materials from previously written Gospels to better present specific literary aims, themes, and messages.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, in some cases, it has been surmised that (more than likely) the authors deliberately presented a form of prostration without using any of these words.<sup>18</sup>

While scattered throughout the New Testament, references to prostration are largely localized in two main sections of writing: the Gospels and Revelation. Prostration is found to a lesser degree elsewhere in the New Testament. It appears in Acts ten times (as both *proskuneō* and *piptō*) in the context of Stephen’s self-defense, Paul’s conversion,<sup>19</sup> the worship of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the conversion of Cornelius.<sup>20</sup> But it only appears twice (once as *piptō* and once as *proskuneō*) in the writings of Paul (both in the same verse, 1 Corinthians 14:25) and once in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 11:21).<sup>21</sup>

However, within the Gospels, prostration appears most frequently, deliberately, and meaningfully in Matthew and John. While appearing in Mark and Luke, it does so less frequently and almost incidentally when compared to the thematic and deliberate manner with which it is used in Matthew.<sup>22</sup> Matthew, on the other hand, uses prostration frequently and obviously enough that it can be considered a deliberate theme (or subtheme) within his Gospel, particularly as connected to his themes of Jesus as the anointed Davidic King of Israel and as Immanuel (“God with us”).<sup>23</sup> This is very different from the way that *proskuneō* appears and is used in the Gospel of John. In John, rather than being spread throughout the text, mention

of prostration is concentrated and focused mainly within one pericope, the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (in John 4).<sup>24</sup>

In the book of Revelation, prostration occurs largely in two contexts, determined mostly by the object of the action. Prostration is mostly directed toward either the Lord or the beast.<sup>25</sup> For instance, “the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship [*proskunēsousin*] him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne” (Revelation 4:10). On the other hand, “they worshipped [*prosekunēsan*] the dragon which gave power unto the beast; and they worshipped [*prosekunēsan*] the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?” (Revelation 13:4). In line with this, considered literarily, Revelation’s usage of prostration is most closely reflective of the ways that prostration is seen in the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup>

The occurrences of prostration in the Gospels, whether repeated or unique, are much more prominent. Prostration occurs prominently in the narratives of some of the most important events in Jesus’s life (particularly in Matthew): in the wise men and Herod pericope (Matthew 2), in the temptation narrative (Matthew 4; Luke 4), after walking on water (Matthew 14:13), the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:6),<sup>27</sup> and with requests for healing or other boons from various individuals throughout the Gospels.<sup>28</sup> Prostration also occupies a prominent place in the narratives of Jesus’s passion, his suffering, death, and resurrection. It occurs in an ironic form with the mockery of the Roman soldiers who dress Jesus up in royal colors and crown of thorns and bow before him (Mark 15:19; Matthew 27:29).<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus is also presented as prostrating as “he went a little further and fell on his face, and prayed” (Matthew 26:39; compare Mark 14:35). In both the cases presenting Jesus as falling prostrate in Gethsemane, the word of prostration is *piptō*.<sup>30</sup> Prostration is also thematically correlated and connected to the Resurrection, particularly the actions of those witness to it (see Matthew 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52–53).

Prostration appears only in a couple of places in the parables and direct teachings of Jesus. The discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 is of distinct interest since it presents an instance of prostration as more devoted (or being more prescriptively defined in Jesus’s prophecy of a coming time) to an internal motivation, unencumbered by physical location or (perhaps) by physical posture (John 4:23–24). Prostration appears in only one of the parables of Jesus, that of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23–35).

Given the aggregate occurrences of prostration in the New Testament in light of the ritual studies methods above, it is clear that, as in the Old Testament, the majority (99 percent) of prostrations occur as rites of exchange or communion, meaning a ritual action in which an individual either presents a request or simply seeks to engage with or demonstrate dependency on the object of prostration (most often God, but also other humans).<sup>31</sup> These numbers accord very well with the overall numbers and presentation of prostration from the Old Testament. In terms of literary analysis, the basic presentation of prostration in the New Testament fits roughly with that of the Old Testament, again indicating the genealogical connection between the cultures and peoples of the New and Old Testaments.

However, considering the difference between numinous and mortal objects of prostration, the New Testament occurrences of prostration revolve around an aspect not found in the Old Testament: the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, the ratio is about 2 to 1, with 68 percent of the instances of prostration directed at a numinous being (mostly God), while 32 percent are directed at other mortals. The New Testament, however, adds a different wrinkle: the consideration of whether or not Jesus is mortal or numinous, or both.<sup>32</sup> Thirty percent of the prostrations in the New Testament are directed at the mortal Jesus.<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, 63 percent of the prostrations are directed at numinous beings, and only 5 percent are directed at specifically mortal recipients.<sup>34</sup> Thus, depending on the theological line one were to take, if Jesus was considered only a mortal, New Testament prostration vis-à-vis its object would look very similar to that of the Old Testament (roughly 63 percent numinous, 35 percent mortal). However, if one accepts Jesus as numinous, then the ratios skew very differently (93 percent numinous and 5 percent mortal).

The ambiguity of Jesus's status combined with the presentation and issues related to prostration in the Old Testament suggests that the Gospel of Matthew is using prostration deliberately for a literary purpose, namely as a vehicle of dramatic irony to heighten the dramatic tension in its presentation of Jesus as both King and Holy One of Israel. We have already seen how prevalent and deliberately placed prostration is in the Gospel of Matthew. With the thirteen occurrences of *proskuneō*,<sup>35</sup> five uses of *piptō*,<sup>36</sup> and additional two instances of *gonupeteō*,<sup>37</sup> the Gospel of Matthew is surpassed in sheer volume of usage only by the book of Revelation. The emphasis on prostration in the Gospel of Matthew can also be seen in the way that the author introduces changes to the materials taken from the Gospel of Mark in its literary composition.<sup>38</sup> Three changes are specifically apparent. The first is that Matthew inserts into the story of Jesus walking on water an instance of prostration not found in Mark. At the point in the narrative when Jesus gets into the boat, Matthew inserts, "They that were in the ship came and worshipped [*prosekunēsan*] him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33).<sup>39</sup> The second and third changes involve a shift in which word is used for prostration. As has been noted, after Jesus's scourging, the Roman soldiers mock him by prostrating before him. However, there is a significant difference here in the fact that while Mark uses *proskuneō* to describe their action (Mark 15:19), Matthew changes this word to *gonupeteō* (Matthew 27:29). It seems that Matthew was loath to use such a positive and theologically significant word (that he was using thematically) to describe the humiliation and mockery of the Roman soldiers. The last change involves a shift in the other direction. In Mark 5:22, Jairus prostrates to Jesus to ask for help healing his daughter; the word used is *piptō*. In Matthew's telling of the story, the word is changed to *proskuneō* (in Matthew 9:18). These changes and the number of times prostration is highlighted throughout the Gospel of Matthew make it clear that the author wanted these actions noted by the audience and was specific and deliberate in his placement of them.

Considering all the instances of prostration in Matthew specifically, it becomes clear that Matthew is deliberately playing on the social and religious uses of prostration as exhibited and established in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, prostration was considered

a normative action in showing respect to, honoring, and entreating the king or someone else of specifically high social standing. However, it was much more commonly utilized as a ritual of exchange or communion with Deity. From this perspective, the usage of prostration throughout the Gospel of Matthew is used as a deliberate example of situational or dramatic irony.<sup>40</sup> Dramatic irony, understood as illuminating “the duality of the difference between what appears to be happening and what is actually happening”<sup>41</sup> and specifically involving the “privileged status of the reader in knowing more than the characters”<sup>42</sup> in the story, has been noted as used frequently in ancient texts to characterize the relationship between the human and the divine.<sup>43</sup> Simply put, Matthew’s presentation of prostration generally sets the characters as prostrating to Jesus while thinking of him as either a man of high power or (at the most) as the true king of Israel, while the reading audience knows more than they do—that he is the Holy One of Israel. In this case, Matthew’s ironic presentation of prostration is firmly situated in the ambiguous and dichotomous uses of prostration as directed at either mortals or numinous beings in the Old Testament. However, without recognizing that aspect of its use, the irony of prostration in Matthew is not as recognizable.

In a more literary turn, it is also clear that Matthew distinctly utilizes the three stages of dramatic irony: installation, exploitation, and resolution. First, in the installation phase, Matthew informs his audience of something that the other characters will not or do not know about or recognize. In this case, it is clear from the very beginning that Jesus is both the prophesied King of Israel and “Emmanuel” (“God with us”), established as such by Matthew’s prophecy-fulfillment formulas and Annunciation narrative (Matthew 1:18–25) and the narrative of the arrival of the wise men and their subsequent prostration before the infant (Matthew 2:1–12).<sup>44</sup> In this manner it is communicated clearly to the reading audience that Jesus is more than simply a man but literally “God with us.” This knowledge, however, is used to increase the tension experienced by the audience (the exploitation stage) throughout the rest of the Gospel as others come and ironically prostrate before Jesus without knowing that while they may consciously be doing so to the King (or at least someone who has high social status or must be entreated to use his power), they are also doing so before God. The audience is left to wonder how and when the truth will become known. This is further intensified by the general situational irony present in all of the Gospels as “salvation is accomplished through the apparent defeat of the Messiah.”<sup>45</sup> Finally, in the resolution stage, Matthew’s Gospel ends with specifically nonironic prostrations, as the women (Matthew 28:9) and the disciples (Matthew 28:17) all prostrate before the risen Lord, who authoritatively declares himself as fully divine: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18).

## Conclusion

Prostration as a ritualized action held an important place socially, politically, and religiously to various peoples throughout the ancient world. As such, it formed an important element of the religious lives of the authors and original audiences of the Old and New Testaments.



To understand the importance and use in the latter, it is vital to have an understanding of its use in the former. Approaching prostration within these scriptural texts from the perspective of ritual studies can help illuminate how and why prostration was used historically and literarily. Doing so carefully can help us understand these specific actions whose meaning and intent were so deeply ingrained in the culture of these people that it went without being said or the authors didn't feel the need to spell it out. For Latter-day Saints, understanding and seeing the different cultural ways of expressing humility, honor, respect, and communion with God in scripture can have important ramifications. It is, of course, important for understanding the scriptures. But it is also important as the Church continues to rise out of obscurity and become a truly global religion. We can see, appreciate, and understand the differences of expression that all of God's children exhibit in their relationships with him.



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## Further Reading

### On ritual

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. The most accessible and in-depth introduction to ritual studies, covering major theories and theorists, as well as methods of analysis of rituals.

Belnap, Daniel L., ed. *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-day Saint Views on Ritual in Scriptures, History, and Practice*. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013. The only substantial volume on ritual within a Latter-day Saint context; important reading for all Latter-day Saints interested in the rituals and ordinances they perform.

Klingbeil, Gerald A. *Bridging the Gap: Ritual and Ritual Texts in the Bible*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007. An introduction to the study of ritual as applied broadly to the Bible, illuminating various rituals and ritualized actions, with a bibliography of other resources for further study.

### On prostration specifically

Bowen, Matthew L. "They Came and Held Him by the Feet and Worshipped Him: Proskynesis before Jesus in Its Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Context." *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (December 2013): 63–89. Another look at prostration as seen in the Bible and ancient Near East, with a different methodological approach.

Fretheim, Terrence. "חרה." In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:42–44. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997. An overview of the usage and importance of the major word for prostration (*yištaḥāweh/hištaḥāwah*) as used in the Old Testament.

Greeven, H. "προσκυνέω." In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6:758–66. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999. An overview of the usage and importance of the major word for prostration (*proskuneō*) in the Greek world and the New Testament.

## Notes

1. The notion of "worship" and what that term means is vague and difficult to pin down; it actually may have distinctly Protestant Christian discursive overtones related to discomfort with ritual (particularly Catholic



ritual) in general and a firmly embedded body-spirit dualism that may not apply or obtain for certain ancient peoples. Thus, its usage as translation for any of the words of prostration discussed may obscure rather than enlighten what the original authors intended.

2. While many approaches, methods, and perspectives have been developed, one of the most versatile and powerful for helping in understanding the socioreligious rituals within scripture (only part of which will be used herein) is the approach found in Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Bell also contributed to and helped develop the field of ritual studies with a more theoretical volume focused on how to understand ritual anthropologically, sociologically, and from a history of religions perspective. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). For an example of ritual analysis directly applicable to Latter-day Saint religious ritual, see Daniel Belnap, ed., *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-day Saint Views on Ritual in Scripture, History, and Practice* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013).
3. As Bell states, these are rituals in which “people make offerings to a god or gods with the practical and straightforward expectation of receiving something in return. . . . Direct offerings may be given to praise, please, and placate divine power, or they may involve an explicit exchange by which human beings provide sustenance to divine powers in return for divine contributions to human well-being.” Bell, *Ritual*, 108. However, she also notes that this exchange can be conceived of as either concrete (expecting, for instance, a good harvest) or rather abstract (with notions of grace or redemption). As she notes, “In ritual, it is probably safe to say that no act is purely manipulative or disinterested. Ritual acts of offering, exchange, and communion appear to invoke very complex relations of mutual interdependence between the human and the divine.” Bell, *Ritual*, 109. Bell’s usage of *divine* is broader than we might colloquially use, including categories of beings we might not include, such as demons.
4. Bell’s typology for rituals involves six categories (which are not considered mutually exclusive—i.e., a given ritual may fit into more than one category at one and the same time). As she states, “In most societies, rituals are multiple and redundant. They do not have just one message or purpose. They have many and frequently some of these messages and purposes can modify or even contradict each other.” Bell, *Ritual*, 136. Her six categories are rituals of exchange/communion, rites of passage/transition, calendrical/commemorative rites, rites of fasting/feasting/festival, rites of affliction, and political rites. Prostration in the New Testament never appears as a rite of passage/transition (rites that accompany important life events, e.g., birth or transition to adulthood, and so forth; for more, see Bell, *Ritual*, 94–102) nor as a calendrical or commemorative rite (rites commemorating special historical or mythological events; for more, see Bell, *Ritual*, 102–8). Likewise, only one instance of prostration can possibly be seen as a rite of affliction (rituals meant to rectify or fix a disrupted relationship, etc.; for more on these, see Bell, *Ritual*, 115–20); this occurs in 1 Corinthians 14:25.
5. For instance, issues of provenance, preservation, incomplete information, textual development across time, and the potential for rituals to be used as literary objects by the authors of the text.
6. Similar to the case in the New Testament, there are other words utilized that also present the same or similar actions. These include words related to the Hebrew roots *qdd*, *npl*, *kr*’. While such words are important for the consideration of the presentation of prostration as a whole, they appear much less frequently. As such, here we will consider the usage of *hištahāwah* as representative.
7. In short, the discovery of the Ugaritic verb *hwy* caused an etymological reevaluation to consider *hištahāwah* as being derived from the root *hwy* in Hebrew (with the root meaning of “to live”), rather than from the root *šhh* (meaning “to bow down”). In either case, however, the term still has the same denotation or meaning in its usage. For more on the detailed analysis of these debates and their ramifications, see H. D. Preuss, “חיה Hwh; הִשְׁתַּחֲוָה Hishtachavāh,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980); and Terence E. Fretheim, “חיה,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997).

8. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 361.
9. This translation is largely upheld because “strictly speaking . . . the verb merely designates a gesture as part of a more inclusive action; but it comes to refer also to the inward attitude thus expressed.” Preuss, “Hishtachavah,” 249.
10. See H. Greeven, “Προσκυνέω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 6:758.
11. “Numinous personages” is here intended to be broadly defined as immortal beings to whom are attributed supernatural powers (or powers beyond that of normal, mortal humans). It should be recognized that in the ancient world there was much more flexibility in defining who and what fell into such a category.
12. Illustrating the variety of its usages are the following: prostration is what Abraham tells his servants he and his son Isaac will do on the mountaintop (Genesis 22:5), while also being what Abraham does to interact with the Hittites while buying the cave for Sarah’s burial (Genesis 23:7, 12). The Israelites and their leaders prostrate in response to Moses’s message and signs of deliverance (Exodus 4:31) as well as after the Passover instructions are given (Exodus 12:27), and the command is given a number of times that the Israelites are not to bow to other gods (Exodus 20:5; 23:24; 34:14; Leviticus 26:1) but are to prostrate to Jehovah (Exodus 24:1; 33:10). However, Moses also declares that the magicians of Pharaoh will bow to him (Exodus 11:8), and he himself prostrates before his father-in-law (Exodus 18:7). In the Psalms, *hištaḥāwah* is used repeatedly to illustrate interaction with deity (e.g., Psalms 5:7; 22:27, 29; 29:2 *passim*) but is used in many other books as the appropriate and expected means of interacting with kings and other honored mortals (e.g., to David in 1 Samuel 25:23, to Solomon in 1 Kings 1:53, and to Haman in Ruth 3:2, 5).
13. For instance, a nondenotative literary analysis can focus on a number of factors surrounding the usage of *hištaḥāwah*: connotative attribution (or the feeling with which it is used), the grammatical person (who is doing the prostration—an individual, or undertaken communally), and the direction or object of the prostration (to whom or to what is it done).
14. This is, by far, the largest category of those from Bell’s typology. Prostration is not utilized at all in the Old Testament in a manner that could be categorized as a rite of passage/life cycle. There is only one instance (0.5 percent of the total instances) that can be labeled as a commemorative or calendrical rite (Deuteronomy 26:10), only four (2 percent) instances that fall within the category of rites of feasting, fasting, and festivals (Nehemiah 9:3; 2 Chronicles 29:28, 29, and 30), and twelve (7 percent) that can be considered rites of affliction (Genesis 33:3, 6, 7, 10; Exodus 11:8; 34:8; Numbers 22:31; Job 1:20; Nehemiah 9:3; 2 Chronicles 29:28–30). After rites of exchange and communion, prostration as used as a political rite is the next largest category, with thirty-four instances (20 percent).
15. In the ancient world (as in the modern world), the line between rituals of communion and exchange can be fuzzy or ill-defined. Communion is understood as making contact or connection, while exchange involves giving something in exchange for something else. For example, offering sacrifice or one’s loyalty to God to ensure a specific blessing (e.g., a bountiful harvest or protection from enemies). These are not, however, the only ways that prostration as a ritualized action appears. Viewing its usage holistically in the Old Testament, a number of categorizations or classifications outside those presented by Bell suggest themselves. These include seeing its usage as being a rite of respect or honoring (31 percent of its instances), rite of thanksgiving or gratitude (20 percent), a rite of praise (11 percent), a rite of salutation (5 percent), a rite of hospitality (1 percent), or even as a rite of mourning (0.5 percent).
16. For each of these, see their respective entries in William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993). Or consult James Strong, John R. Kohlenberger, and James A. Swanson, *The Strongest Strong’s: Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004). Likewise, there are plenty of online resources or Bible study programs that are useful in this regard. It should be noted that the denotative and idiomatic meaning of *piptō* is much broader than that of the other words, as it can mean “to fall” (i.e., to happen or occur as well as to drop or collapse) as well as

“to die.” Thus, not all of its uses represent a specific act of prostration, and even some of those that arguably do represent a type or form of prostration may deliberately use *piptō* for its idiomatic connotations of death mixed with a potential symbolic prostration meaning—for example, the experience of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 (who literally die but are symbolically presented as prostrating while so doing) or the experience of Jesus in Gethsemane in Mark 14:35 and Matthew 26:39 (who literally is prostrating but is presented symbolically as dying). The use of *katapiptō* is similar in its broader meaning. However, because of its infrequency, it is not as influential or is potentially meant deliberately. The word appears only three times in the New Testament, only one of which (Acts 26:14) resonates with prostration.

17. On the individual nature and voices of the four Gospels, see Gaye Strathearn and Frank F. Judd Jr., “The Distinctive Testimonies of the Four Gospels,” *Religious Educator* 8, no. 2 (2007): 59–85.
18. For instance, the anointing and kissing of the feet of Jesus by the sinful woman in Luke 7. For an analysis of this experience as a type of prostration, see Matthew L. Bowen, “They Came and Held Him by the Feet and Worshipped Him: Proskynesis before Jesus in Its Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquities* 5 (December 2013): 80–82. While it is clear that there are symbolic resonances in this case, arguments can be made against such (or at the least that the author did not want the connection to be made overtly) because of the lack of any prostration word as well as the fact that she is described explicitly as standing (Luke 7:37–38).
19. While Paul is willing to describe some of his actions with *proskuneō* (see Acts 24:11), in the three accounts of his conversion story *piptō* and *katapiptō* are used (Acts 9:4; 10:25; 26:14). This may be because, literarily, the narrator of the first account and Paul (while personally telling the other two) desired to have more idiomatic implications of death present in the usage of *piptō* while retaining the image of prostration as the proper reaction to contact with divinity.
20. Cornelius’s prostration is the outlier in this category, as it is the only prostration to a human in the non-Gospels and non-Revelation materials. In general, prostration to other humans is done relatively infrequently in the New Testament, occurring only three times (Matthew 18:26; Acts 10:25; Revelation 3:9), excluding those prostrations directed toward the mortal Jesus, given the theological point of view of the Gospel writers that Jesus was divine. This point, of course, could be debated in the Gospel of Mark, given its relatively low Christology, but prostration does not play as large a point in Mark’s Gospel as it does in the Gospels of Matthew and John, who present a much higher Christology. Even then, in Matthew 18:26, the prostration presented is ambiguous in this regard because it occurs in a parable directed to a human king who is likened to the ruler of the kingdom of heaven and who has been traditionally identified with Jesus.
21. The instances of prostration occurring in 1 Corinthians 10:25 and Hebrews 11:21 seem to be mainly incidental references to the action, without major literary importance within those specific texts.
22. Prostration appears in Mark twice as *proskuneō* (5:6; 15:19), twice as *piptō* (5:22; 14:35), and twice as *gonupeteō* (1:40; 10:17). Luke uses *proskuneō* three times (4:7; 4:8; 24:52) and *piptō* three times (5:12; 8:41; 17:16).
23. While these themes and concepts appear in the other Gospels, arguably Matthew uses them in a much more overt and central manner. On this, see Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 239–42. For other background, see Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Eric D. Huntsman, and Thomas A. Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 62–77.
24. *Proskuneō* appears twelve times in John, with ten occurrences in John 4:20–24. The other two occurrences are in John 9:38 (describing a blind man who was healed) and 12:20 (describing the Greeks in Jerusalem for the Passover). *Piptō* appears only twice in John 11:32 (Mary falling at Jesus’s feet) and 18:36 (with the guard accompanying Judas falling to the ground when Jesus announced who he was via invocation of the divine name in the garden).
25. There are important exceptions to this, including one instance of prostration to humans (the church at Philadelphia; Revelation 3:9) and a number directed toward an angel (Revelation 19:10; 22:8). It should be

- noted that in both of the cases with the angel, the one prostrating (John) is rebuked for doing so and told to prostrate before God instead.
26. On the question of numinous beings, this delineation follows the typology established in the ancient world wherein beings not explicitly understood as mortal would be understood as numinous or “divine,” be they angels, demons, or God.
  27. Prostration is not recounted in the versions of the event in Mark 9:2–10 and Luke 9:28–36.
  28. The mother of the sons of Zebedee approaches and prostrates before Jesus on behalf of her sons (Matthew 20:20); the Gadarene demoniac prostrates before Jesus before asking him not to torment him and to allow him to enter into the swine (Mark 5:6). This is a common occurrence with others requesting healing—for example, Jairus prostrates to ask for healing for his daughter (Matthew 9:18; compare Mark 5:22, Luke 8:41), the woman of Canaan prostrates to ask for the same for her daughter (Matthew 15:25), the man with the possessed son also prostrates to beseech Jesus for help (Matthew 17:14), and a leper beseeches Jesus for healing while prostrating (Luke 5:12). Once prostration even occurs as a gesture of gratitude or thanksgiving *after* a healing (Luke 17:15–16).
  29. The Matthew reference is, significantly, not *proskuneō* but *gonupeteō*. Mark uses *proskuneō* in his account.
  30. Prostration in this case seems to be presented as a ritual of exchange (“O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt”; Matthew 26:39), but by using *piptō* rather than *proskuneō*, the authors distance themselves from the full theological and literary import of such a word while also retaining the imagery and symbolism of prostration combined with *piptō*’s connotations of death.
  31. The one exception is found in John 18:36. Interestingly, however, given the very public display being shown as well as the intense sociopolitical context of the New Testament’s composition, it is easy to see a vast majority of the instances (87 percent) also being read as entailing an “emphasis on the public display of religio-cultural sentiments. . . . [with individuals] express[ing] publicly—to themselves, each other, and sometimes outsiders—their commitment and adherence to basic religious values,” and thus falling into the category of rites of feasting, fasting, and festivals. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 120. Admittedly, this is a debatable understanding based on the interpretation and viewpoint of the reader. It could easily be understandable for a reader to take a narrower view of what constitutes the feasting, fasting, and festival category and concluding that none of these are such. The major sticking point is the general performative nature of these rituals: they are almost all done in public, within the gaze of others—did the actors intend them to be a publicly overexpression of their devotion, belief, or faith in Jesus to fulfill requests or do something else? It seems in most cases that most readers would answer yes to such questions. Likewise, 44 percent of the occurrences can also potentially be seen as overt political statements or political rites. These specific instances are labeled “political” insofar as each of them has distinct messages of either rejection of secular authority or recognition of Jesus as having numinous religious or theological political authority.
  32. It is, of course, recognized that this distinction and debate about it have been important theologically since the earliest days of the Christian era. The viewpoint for this chapter is that Jesus was both mortal and numinous during his mortal ministry.
  33. This, of course, excludes those directed at him after his resurrection, when it is clear that he is (1) not mortal anymore and (2) is fully divine or numinous.
  34. In the New Testament, the category of numinous beings includes not only God but also the eleven instances directed to the beast and/or the dragon in the book of Revelation, as well as those instances with Satan as the object in the temptation narratives. The other few instances remaining are not fully specified or even implied by context and thus are left out.
  35. These are found in Matthew 2:2, 8, 11; 4:9, 10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9, 17.
  36. Two of these are found in tandem (describing the same subject and action) with instances of *proskuneō*, in Matthew 2:11 and 4:9. The other three stand on their own and are found in 17:6, 18:29, and 26:39.
  37. These two instances are in Matthew 17:14 and 27:29.

38. On the reliance of Matthew on Mark, for a general introduction see Holzapfel, Huntsman, and Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*, 50–51. It should be noted that other scholars see the opposite relationship, that is, Markan reliance on Matthew. For more in-depth introduction to the debates and hypotheses related to the “Synoptic problem,” see Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 44–55.
39. This story also appears in John 6:15–21 but is not told in Luke. In John there is no mention of prostration either.
40. Irony, in all of its forms (dramatic, verbal, character, and so forth), is a concept of distinct importance in all of the Gospels to one extent or another and has been examined in many different ways. The Gospels of Mark and John have been shown to use irony in a variety of ways. Likewise, the Gospel of Matthew has been examined for irony in various ways. However, I am not aware of anyone discussing the usage of prostration as ironic. For an introduction to irony as presented in the Gospels, see Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 77–78, 177, 304–5. For more in-depth discussions of irony, both more broadly in the Greek and in the ancient world as well as more specifically in the Gospel of Matthew, see Karl McDaniel, *Experiencing Irony in the First Gospel: Suspense, Surprise and Curiosity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and InHee C. Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).
41. Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative*, 88.
42. Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative*, 93.
43. See Berg, *Irony in the Matthean Passion Narrative*, 4–5.
44. Likewise, the contrast with Herod, who also declares intent to prostrate before the new king (Matthew 2:8) but obviously doesn’t really intend to, sets up two groupings for categorizing those who do prostrate, a categorization known by the audience but that the characters themselves do not recognize.
45. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 77.