

Aspects of Heavenly Worship

by Stephen Huebscher

“Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.” It seems simple enough, yet evangelical churches in North America reflect disparate and sometimes conflicting beliefs and practices. And no wonder! One person believes that the Psalms are the basis for worship, while a second person thinks that the OT can’t be used that way because the Mosaic system of worship has been replaced, while a third thinks that “as long as it is done ‘decently and in order,’ it’s OK.” Yikes!

When trying to determine a theological center for an evangelical theology of worship that is faithful to the rule of Scripture, I believe that it may be helpful to realize that ancient peoples often believed that heaven provided a pattern, or perhaps more accurately *the* pattern, for earthly worship.¹ They believed that the way people are to worship was revealed from g/God in heaven, and that earthly worship should somehow correspond to and be synchronized with the worship going on in g/God’s presence. In biblical terms, we could say “as in heaven, so on earth.” Put in academic terms, we could say that God’s presence as seen in heaven provided the center for their theology of worship. This idea has intrigued me for some time, and I’m beginning to think it might have some merit *if* one focuses not on heaven *per se*, but on God’s presence.

As one of the younger, “junior scholars” present at this gathering, I hope that the five aspects of heavenly liturgy I have chosen to study will be helpful as we consider our response to our God in worship. Further, I hope that the unique contribution of this paper is not just a focus on the worship in heaven, but rather the interpreting of that worship in light of the significance of God’s presence and in light of his heavenly family or council (see below), and then seeing that worship as providing theological motifs that can (and should) help guide and define and, at times, perhaps even limit Christian worship. For the sake of clarity in this essay, I will generally refer to corporate worship as “liturgy,” and use the word “worship” to refer either to private worship or to that more general way of viewing all of life as a worshipful sacrifice to God.²

FIVE ASPECTS OF HEAVENLY LITURGY

1. *Presence of God*

The Church is the new temple of God.³ The biblical teaching is this: God the Holy Spirit dwells in individual Christians, and also in a unique way in a church gathered for worship (e.g., 1 Cor 3:16). Most Christians will agree with this. This is, for lack of better terminology, an “invisible theophany.” I think it is a mistake to argue that merely because we may not visibly see God during liturgy that the reality of the Spirit’s presence among us would greatly change the situation. Let me explain.

First, all appearances by God divinely initiated. It is the stuff of magic and paganism to try to conjure up a coming of God. Second, we have to distinguish between God’s special appearances and his general omnipresence. When God appears, it is for a purpose; then he leaves. Third, “God often appears in order to save,” though sometimes he appears in order to judge.⁴ This leads to a fourth point, viz.: because God is holy and because he imparts holiness, an appearance by him is not a neutral event.⁵

Therefore the first response that is necessary of every worshiper is holiness. The presence of God in worship mandates holiness by the worshipers. Because God cannot tolerate sin, no one can worship him who is not holy. This raises many serious questions that Christians have long thought about. Who is holy? How are they made holy? How is holiness reaffirmed at the time of worship? As has been often observed (and perhaps more often denied!), unsaved people cannot worship God, and that is fundamentally true because they are not holy. Only those who are holy can worship God.

A fifth point about God’s coming to be with his people is that he comes in order to speak to them. “God’s words are an essential part of theophany in every case. His pronouncement is all-important, for without it the phenomena of theophany would go unexplained.”⁶ I think here of the apostle Peter’s exhortation, “Let everyone who speaks [in the liturgy of the church], speak as the oracles of God” (1 Pet 4:11). Ramsey

¹ For instance, there are the references to the Mosaic worship being built on the pattern or model from heaven (e.g., Ex. 25:40, etc.). For later references, see Stephen Huebscher, “Worship him, all ye heavenly hosts’: Heavenly Worship in Second Temple Judaism, Early Christianity, and Gnostic Sects,” unpublished paper presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Valley Forge, PA, November 2005.

² Everyone writes from some perspective, and I write as a Baptist with a non-sacramental view of the ordinances and a generally conservative bent.

³ See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (IVP, 2004).

⁴ J. J. Niehaus, “Theophany,” *NIDOTTE* 4.1248.

⁵ These four points are a summary of Niehaus, “Theophany,” 1247-48.

⁶ Niehaus, “Theophany,” 1249.

Michaels offers these comments: “ ‘Speaking’ (λαλειν) refers not to ordinary conversation (which would not have to be ‘a word from God’) but to authoritative speech in worship assemblies In effect, Peter is broadening traditional understandings of prophecy so as to include all the teaching and exhortation that goes on in connection with Christian worship.”⁷ Prophetic preaching in the liturgy is necessary for congregations to hear God speaking to them as a group today. Although I cannot argue this point here, I believe that preaching is more important for liturgy than the Lord’s Supper, although the latter is often badly treated indeed.

2. Eucharist

The Eucharist/Lord’s Supper is an earthly type of the eschatological, messianic banquet. It not only looks back to Christ’s death, but it prophetically looks forward to his eschatological victory.⁸ “The eschatological banquet is here interpreted as a restoration of the table fellowship broken by Jesus’ death—which in turn suggests that table fellowship with the risen Lord is a foretaste of the consummation.”⁹ Not only is it future directed, but it is a victory meal—a celebration that Jesus has begun to reign. This may tie in to the ancient combat myth, elements of which are found in the OT, in which the successful god would celebrate a victory by having a banquet afterwards.¹⁰

Jesus mentioned the messianic banquet not only during his public ministry (Matt 8:11; 22:1-10, 29-30 [connected with thrones and judgment]; 25:10; Luke 12:36; [13:29]; 14:8), but—significantly—also at the Last Supper (Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). Revelation 19:9 mentions the wedding supper of the Lamb, and should probably be taken to refer to the eschatological (wedding) meal mentioned elsewhere in Scripture (Isa. 25:6-7; 65:13-17).¹¹ Also, in connection with the point earlier mentioned in this essay about the significance of being in God’s presence, one should not discount the OT background of eating in the presence of God (Heb. לפני יהוה, *liphney yhwh*, Deut. 12:7, 18; Neh 8:13-18) merely because of a lack of clear quotation or allusion here.¹² Eucharistic eating is in the presence of God, and so the participation of proper (i.e., holy) recipients is important, a fact which does have some basis in the history of the early Church.¹³

Another point that must be made is that those who eat will rule and reign as well (Matt 22:29-30; Luke 22:18; 28-30; Rev 3:20-21). If they rule, so what? Then the Lord’s Supper becomes a sign that we will—or perhaps are beginning to—reign with Christ. What does it mean to reign with Christ? We don’t know for sure, but some options include participating in the judgment of unholy people and divine messengers (“angels”; 1 Cor 6:2-3; Rev 2:26-27), ruling over the new creation (akin to Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8), and ruling over heavenly messengers (Heb 2:5-7).¹⁴ However it is construed, it should be seen to be the final fulfillment of Dan. 7:18, 27.

Faithful, righteous believers are the participants in the messianic feast, and the Lord’s Supper typifies this when it is open to believers only. It is also an indicator that Christian worship must have a strong already/not yet, eschatological character, as opposed to being characterized by the attitudes and ethos of the present age and culture.

3. Prayer & sacrifice

Revelation, which deals with the celestial world so much, contains three passages which are important for our purposes—Rev. 5:8; 6:9-10; and 8:3-5. In Rev 5:8 the heavenly elders function as celestial priests. David Crump writes that “the prayers of the saints are a priestly activity contributing to heavenly adoration Since burning incense was a priestly responsibility, the elders are functioning as priestly

⁷ J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC 49, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 250-51.

⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19—28* (T&T Clark, 1997), 475.

⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19—28*, 477.

¹⁰ Paul D. Hanson, *Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 322.

¹¹ Aune, *Revelation 17—22* (Word, 1998), 1032. Beale prefers to focus on the application of “close table fellowship” (Beale, *Revelation*, 945). Other texts that could be added, though not specifically wedding texts, include Matt 8:11-12; Luke 13:28-29; 14:15; 22:28-30. See also Dennis E. Smith, “Messianic Banquet,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD) 4.788-91.

¹² H. Simian-Yofre, “פנים *panim*,” *TDOT* 11.609-10; A. van der Woude calls it a “cultic technical term” (“פנים *panim*, face,” *TLOT* 2.1012). Of the Deut. passage, J. G. McConville writes, “The plain meaning is that he is actually present, just as he has been present with Israel during their journeyings to the land (1:31). There is no engagement here with the issue of how he is present,” (*Deuteronomy*, [Apollos; InterVarsity, 2002], 223). Since God was believed to participate in the זבח שלמים (fellowship sacrifices) as host, and since these communion meals were eaten in the sanctuary לפני יהוה (“in the presence of the LORD”), there seems to me to be a conceptual parallel here to the Christian Lord’s Supper. See also B. Lang, “זבח *zabach*,” *TDOT* 4.25-27.

¹³ “One of the ways in which early Christians interpreted their communal meals (both Eucharist and agape) was as a messianic banquet being celebrated proleptically in the presence of the risen Lord,” (Smith, “Messianic banquet,” 790).

¹⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 1116-17.

intermediaries before God's throne."¹⁵ (This was also a common feature of early Jewish understandings of heaven, and may have some basis in the OT.)¹⁶ They offer up the prayers of the saints (*hagioi*)—in this case the people of God on earth.¹⁷ The specific identification of the prayers with incense in Rev 5:8 seems to have its OT basis in Ps 141:2 (“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you”; MT v. 3). Richard Bauckham writes about these unidentified prayers: “Set in the context of chapter 5, it is natural to suppose that ‘the prayers of the saints’ of verse 8 are for the coming of God’s kingdom. . . .”¹⁸

Rev 6:9-10 (“the souls under the altar”) is probably based on the picture of the altar of burnt offerings, where the blood was poured out at the base of the altar, as opposed to the altar of incense elsewhere in Revelation (8:3-5; 9:13; 14:18; the altar in 16:7 is for burnt offerings).¹⁹ Of the heavenly sacrifices we see in Revelation, we should note that the “souls under the altar” in Rev 5 is an arresting picture of the saints themselves becoming sacrifices, since “their shed blood has become an acceptable sacrifice on heaven’s altar. The imagery of God receiving Christian suffering as an acceptable sacrifice appears elsewhere in the New Testament (2 Cor. 4:11; Phil. 2:17; Col. 1:24; 2 Tim. 4:6), but Revelation offers a particularly graphic elaboration: the martyrs’ lifeblood is running down the sides of the altar (compare Lev. 17:11, 14: “the life of a creature is in its blood”) and accumulating at God’s feet.”²⁰

Rev 8:3-5 differs from 5:8 in that the prayers are differentiated from the incense. In this text, they are most likely prayers for God’s vindication and vengeance, according to Aune.²¹ Bauckham goes further with this, however, and sees the vindication and vengeance as part of the coming of the kingdom of God, which has been the prayer of all the saints.²² Bauckham also notes,

Thus, important as prayers for vengeance are in the structure and the theology of Revelation, the distinctive message of Revelation requires that the prayer for the coming of the kingdom not be limited to them. It must be prayer not only for vengeance on the inhabitants of the earth, as in 6:10, but also prayer for the conversion of the inhabitants of the earth. Even though Revelation does not portray the latter form of prayer within its visionary narrative, the impact of its message encourages such prayer.²³

Thus the heavenly prayers give a powerful example for prayer in Christian liturgical assemblies—the prayers of a suffering church for vindication, for the conversion of the unregenerate, and for Christ’s soon return. Each of these theological motifs is linked to numerous other texts in Scripture and provides guidance for churches at prayer.

4. Music

Most of the music shown in biblical celestial liturgy narratives is probably best characterized as congregational singing, a fact that should not be quickly overlooked.²⁴ “Worship in the Apocalypse is ‘genuinely congregational’ and inclusively unites variegated levels of creation into a sea of doxological praise

¹⁵ David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 271.

¹⁶ Aune, *Revelation 1—5*, 356. There is also a curious note in Daniel 10:12 where the angel says that Daniel’s prayers were heard. The MT and Theodotian have 3 pl. (MT נשעו; ηχουσθησαν), while the o-text (in the Göttingen LXX) has 3 sg (εισηχοσθη).

¹⁷ Elsewhere “saints” is used of both celestial messengers and worshipers of God in both the OT and NT (Aune, *Revelation 1—5*, 359). It is another evidence of the overlap between the heavenly community and the earthly one. Understood within the context of NT thought, it may also typify the understanding of faithful believers’ eschatological future as being “equal to heavenly messengers” (Gk., *isangeloi* in Matt. 21:30). The overlap is also found in the parallel Hebrew word for “saints” or “holy ones” (קדושים; Aram. קדושין). This fits with the findings of H. -J. Fabry, “סוד, *sod*” in *TDOT* 10.174-75

¹⁸ Richard Bauckham, “Prayer in the Book of Revelation,” in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001), 255.

¹⁹ So Bauckham, “Prayer,” 260-61.

²⁰ Crump, *Knocking*, 271.

²¹ Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, 511-15.

²² Bauckham, “Prayer,” 256-57.

²³ Bauckham, “Prayer,” 266.

²⁴ This is quite different from some of the Gnostic representations, which include both solos (e.g., “X hymned Y”) and group singing. It is, however, in line with musical performance in the OT. “The summons to sing Yahweh’s praises to the accompaniment of strings is addressed primarily to the assembled congregation and its individual members, secondarily, in eschatological prolepsis, to the entire earth. There is no more suggestion that this mandate be delegated to professional singers or musicians than in the case of the summons to praise, glorify, sing, etc. Singing God’s praises is fundamentally the function of the devout as a body; they have this joyous mandate—if we may so interpret the exclusive use of the piel—not merely accidentally and occasionally, but habitually, indeed as their profession,” C. Barth, “*zmr*,” *TDOT* 4.98.

to the Godhead.”²⁵ Congregational singing, and not just the use of music, soloists, or choirs seems to be in view here. The elders’ possession of harps (Rev. 5:8) is also highly suggestive, since harps were used to accompany psalm singing as well as in the worship in the temple.²⁶ “Evidence in the book of Revelation suggests that instrumental accompaniment is desirable if it does not dominate the text. Accompaniment acts in a manner that supports the logogenic character of the music.”²⁷ This then would be one of the few NT passages (perhaps the only one?) that seem to support the use of musical instruments in liturgy, albeit with a limited function in view. Logically, if congregational singing seems to have a priority in liturgy, then the music itself must be singable by the congregation. So much of what is put under the rubric of “Christian music” today is really not appropriate for use in liturgy, if only because it is intended for trained singers.

In Revelation, we read about the *καὶνός* (new) song, which “associates Christ’s redemptive work with the beginning of a new creation”²⁸ It “stresses the qualitative rather than the temporal, that is, it is new in kind,”²⁹ like the new creation of the eschaton. I would draw a theological conclusion that music justified by the “new song” should not strongly reflect the ethos of the contemporary culture. In other words, it is not enough to say that pop styles of music are appropriate in the liturgy simply because the Bible tells us to sing a new song to the Lord. The “new song” points to the new world order, not the old. So the question is then raised, Can there be a single, specific church music style?³⁰ Probably not, since music is culturally-influenced. However, since music is often viewed as a sacrifice of praise (correctly, I think), I suggest that it is appropriate to build on that use of sacrificial terminology and to ask further, Since sacrifices must be holy, do styles music have the capacity to be perceived within their respective cultures as “unclean,” “common but clean,” or “holy”?³¹ If so (and I personally believe they do), I would argue that music used in liturgy must be perceived as holy, and not merely as clean. Is this subjective? Yes. Is it true? I believe it is. This standard is flexible enough to apply to different cultures, and yet firm enough to lend biblical support and theological rationale for deciding which music is appropriate for liturgy and which is not.

A further question to ask about the music used in liturgy, is this: Does the emotion of the music encourage emotionalism or even mysticism,³² or does it lead to a whole-body unity with the words giving response to God?³³ Some have argued that church music should allow us to transcend the rational (i.e., the words) to the mystical.³⁴ This is where we have to draw the line, because irrational worship is essentially pagan. In Scripture, the congregational singing does not seem to lead to mystical or ecstatic experiences.³⁵ I

²⁵ Thomas A. Seel, *A Theology of Music Derived from the Book of Revelation*, SLM 3 (Metuchen, NJ; London: Scarecrow, 1995), 126, following Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1936), 98.

²⁶ Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 258.

²⁷ Seel, *A Theology of Music*, 141. In addition, “Instrumental heralding (specifically, the trumpet call) is used to announce the revelation of the Godhead So too it can be used in the church today in a similar manner Although the Book of Revelation does not allow for the responsive use of ‘pure’ music, the Christian experience historically supports its practice in many traditions,” (ibid.).

²⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 358.

²⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 259.

³⁰ See the excellent entry by Richard French, “Church Music,” in the *New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Belknap/Harvard, 1986), 166-69, esp. 168

³¹ As an example, in seminary I had an acquaintance from Jamaica who said that “Christian reggae” would never catch on in Jamaica because of the strong association of reggae with the local pagan worship. To use sacrificial terminology, it was perceived as “unclean” by the Christians in that culture. At this point, many people mistakenly appeal to the example of Martin Luther, whom they allege used “bar music” for his hymns like “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (EIN FEST BURG). Of course, Luther did no such thing, but utilized a musical form then current which was called “bar form,” but had no connection with beer halls, pubs, or drinking taverns. (For historical references, check the articles on bar form, church music, and Martin Luther in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.) Music may be pretty and singable, and yet lack the feeling of reverence which is so essential to music used in liturgy, whether that be fast or slow, happy or sad. Such music would be considered “common” or “clean” but not appropriate, i.e., “holy.”

³² The term “mysticism” has a variety of referents within Christian history and theology. Here I am referring to that stream of mystical thought beginning at least with Pseudo-Dionysius that reached its climax in the writings of St. Teresa of Avila. Its primary characteristic is “a change from the objective participation in the mystery of Christ, with no particular interest in subjective phenomena, to the subjective mystical experience which is the preserve of the mystic.” Lesser but still important characteristics include “sometimes a certain anti-intellectualism and thus an incipient split between theology and spirituality. There is also a considerable openness to visionary experiences in such affective mysticism. . . . What this change of emphasis amounts to can be seen from the writings of St Teresa of Avila, for in her writings we find an attempt to distinguish different levels of prayer . . . by reference to the psychological characteristics of such states.” Quotations are from Andrew Louth, s.v. “Mysticism,” in Gordon S. Wakefield, ed., *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 273.

³³ See Steven R. Guthrie, “Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit,” *JETS* 46 (December 2003): 633-46.

³⁴ I am *not* equating “mystical” with “mysterious”; I am not against right-brained, non-verbal elements in liturgy!

³⁵ Besides Revelation, music does not lead to ecstatic experiences in Ephesians (see Guthrie, “Singing”) or in the OT. For instance, as with the Akkadian preposition *ina*, so also the Hebrew preposition *b-* “is not used to introduce the instrument ‘upon’

would suggest that in historic Christian hymnody we have a liturgical tradition that meets the requirements of congregational singing very well.

5. God's heavenly family as the primary ecclesial and liturgical model

Excursus on the God's heavenly family— the divine council

The divine what? The divine council, also called the divine assembly, was one of the most important parts of ancient Israelite cosmology, i.e., their understanding of the universe,³⁶ though it was not unique to them. The divine council (hereafter DC) was composed of high-ranking divine beings that ruled (the nations) with delegated authority under Yahweh and were assigned various responsibilities. They are called the following in the HB:

בני אל *beney el/elim/elohim/ha'elohim* "sons of god"

כוכבים *kokkabim* "stars"

קדשים *qodeshim* "holy ones" or "saints"

אלהים *elohim* "gods," "divine beings"

רוח *ruach* "spirit"

The Hebrew words referring to the group qua group commonly include these:

סוד *sod* "council," "counsel"³⁷

עדה *'edah* "assembly"³⁸

קהל *qahal* "contingent, assembly"³⁹

Often in modern literature, these beings have been called "angels," which is simply an anglicized version of the Greek word *ἄγγελος* *angelos* and does very little to actually tell us what they were.⁴⁰ Like the Heb. word מלאך *mal'ak*, *angelos* means "messenger." To complicate things, the LXX uses *angelos* to translate terms which more clearly affirm divine plurality, e.g., *beney elohim* "sons of God" in Deut. 32:8 in the case of the LXX. This pattern was also followed in some NT texts as well (e.g., Heb 2:7). However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the ancient peoples before Israel's exile, Israel included, did not consider the sons of God to be "angels" unless they were sent as "messengers."⁴¹ And even during the time when the generic "messenger" term began to replace "divine being," it is not clear that the modern conception of "angel" was substituted for "divine being" or "spirit." In fact, close study shows that at least a Qumran,

which the singer 'plays'; it designates rather the accompanying circumstance, the musical accompaniment to the song ('to the accompaniment of the . . . instrument')" (Barth, "*zmr*," 96). "The structural connection between the summons to praise and its execution stated in *ki* clauses and participles shows once more that *zmr* without exception refers to an articulated singing and playing in which comprehensible words are uttered" (Barth, "*zmr*," 97).

³⁶ Patrick D. Miller, "Cosmology and World Order," 422-44. Also note this statement from the preface: "At various points I have suggested that [the divine council] is a dimension of Israel's religion and of the literature it produced that cannot be overestimated in significance. The mythopoeic character of the heavenly assembly as a theme has led to its general neglect . . . in the literature," (idem, *Biblical Theology*, 9).

³⁷ The heavenly *sod* is never explicitly defined in Scripture, but seems to have been understood as the 70 sons of God (*beney 'elohim*) who each ruled over one of the 70 nations thought to comprise the world (Gen. 10; Deut. 4:19-20; 32:8-9 LXX, DSS). Significantly, the term *sod* was also applied to righteous, human worshipers on earth in some texts. Dennis Pardee writes in a review, "There appears to be very little semantic development of the term סוד [*sod*] within Biblical Hebrew. The picture in the Dead Sea Scrolls is less clear," (*JBL* 116 [1997]: 117).

³⁸ *HALOT*, 789-90. Sometimes there are clear cultic connotations.

³⁹ *HALOT*, 1079-80. Other translations include "congregation" and "community." Like the previous, sometimes there are clear cultic connotations.

⁴⁰ See S. A. Meier, "Angel I," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (DDD)*, 46, 47, 50. The *TDNT* article on *ἄγγελος* *angelos* is a good example of erroneous assuming that the ancients actually had in mind so-called "angels."

⁴¹ This has been pointed out by Ronn Johnson ("The Old Testament Background for Paul's Identification of 'Principalities and Powers'," Ph. D. diss. Dallas Theological Seminary, 2004), among others. G. von Rad struggled with the issue somewhat, and although he did not go as far as I do, still he wrote "Yet when we investigate the attestation in exilic and early post-exilic Scripture, we are hardly justified in speaking of an angelology in the narrower sense. We must be careful not to construct a system when there is no need for it" (*TDNT* 1.79). J. J. Collins cites a reference from *1 Enoch* 14:21-23 which "implies a distinction between 'angels' . . . and 'holy ones' . . . , because 'no angel could enter' the presence of God (14:21)," *Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 303.

that the meaning of “divine being” continued on.⁴² These two terms do seem to have been synonymous at times. Therefore, in this paper, I will generally follow their ancient convention and not categorically refer to all heavenly beings (besides God) as “angels” nor to define the “sons of God” as “angels” rather than “spirits,” “divine beings,” “gods,” etc.⁴³

Those beings in his council (סוד, *sod*) are charged with three functions: The first category contains our primary interest—heavenly praise, though various functions are interconnected.⁴⁴

- (a) demonstration of Yahweh’s omnipotence in the form of accompaniment (Dt. 33:2), praise (Job 38:7; Ps. 19:2[1]; 29:1f.), fear (Ps. 89:7f. [6f.]), counsel in the form of obedient response (Job 1f.; Isa. 6:8; cf. the resistance to polytheistic notions in Isa. 40:13f.);
- (b) mediation of Yahweh’s salvific will to the world of human beings (1 K. 22; Isa. 6; cf. Dt. 32:8f.; Jer. 23:22);
- (c) implementation of social justice (Am. 3:7; cf. Ps. 82:3f.).⁴⁵

The divine council was a key part of the heavenly, liturgical paradigm in the OT. Hebrew scholar and theologian Patrick D. Miller writes: “*the council of the Lord is the place where the goal of all creation, praise, begins*” [italics original].⁴⁶ There are several important texts in the OT which speak of the DC worshiping God. These include Deut 32:43;⁴⁷ Pss. 29:1-2; 89:6-9 [EV 5-8]; 97:7-9; 103:20-21; 148:2; Job 38:7; Neh. 9:6. This function is reasonably well attested in the HB, and has support from Mesopotamian⁴⁸ and possibly even Egyptian texts as well.⁴⁹ The worship appears to be totally celestial in these passages. This is a striking observation, and it raises the question of why later groups would believe that they had the right or ability to join the celestial worship (e.g., Qumranites, but perhaps also Christians [e.g., Rev 5], and certainly mystical Gnostic and Jewish sects. This finding fits with an interpretation of Gen 1:26-27 where the DC is viewed in some sense as the heavenly model for the (earthly) human community (i.e., the divine image), and where the human community is viewed as in some sense partaking of the heavenly/divine/spirit realm.⁵⁰ These texts that mention celestial worship/cult should probably be read within the wider context of others, such as the Song of the Sea (Ex 15:11, “who is like you among the

⁴² “This observation is also of importance for the understanding of the doctrine of angels. *For here the angels seem to be—as in the Old Testament—God’s heavenly court rather than actual intermediary beings. Angels are seen to move “up” as gods come down.* They have not been created to bridge the gulf between the divine, or heavenly, and the earthly, but they have simply been taken over from the Bible and the thought world of contemporary Judaism and been understood as God’s messenger’s and servants,” Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of Qumran: Theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, trans. Emilie T. Sander (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 81-82; quoted in Ronn Johnson, “Old Testament Background for Paul’s Identification of ‘Principalities and Powers,’” (Ph.D. Diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2004), 25.

⁴³ For the record, I would like to note that I believe that the ancient record of Israel’s faith in Scripture did not violate the distinctions between the Creator and creation, and that such beliefs should therefore not be considered polytheism. Thus, I do not see an inherent conflict between these texts and historic, orthodox Christianity.

⁴⁴ For example, see the connection between eating the eschatological meal and participating in judgment (which is an activity of the DC) in Luke 22:28-30 and Rev. 3:20-21. Unfortunately, the biblical texts do not elucidate the nature or significance of this connection, but its presence does highlight the need to study the different activities of both the DC and the church in order to establish the presence and significance of such relationships.

⁴⁵ H. -J. Fabry, “סוד, *sod*” in *TDOT* 10.174-75; idem, “סוד als ekklesiologischer Terminus,” *Bausteine Biblischer Theologie: Festgabe für G. Johannes Botterweck zum 60. Geburtstag dargebracht von seinen Schülern*, (Köln-Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1977), 123. For further points of connection between the heavenly and earthly tribunals in Judaism and Christianity, see Joseph M. Baumgarten, “The Duodecimal Courts of Qumran, Revelation, and the Sanhedrin,” *JBL* 95 (March 1976): 59-78; idem, “The Heavenly Tribunal and the Personification of Sedeq in Jewish Apocalyptic,” in Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haas, *Religion: Judentum: Allgemeines, Palastinensisches Judentum* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 219-39.

⁴⁶ “Cosmology and World Order in the Old Testament: The Divine Council as Cosmic Political Symbol,” in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays JSOTSup* 267 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 440-41; reprinted from *HBT* 9 (1987): 53-78.

⁴⁷ There is a significant text critical issue here, and I am following the evidence of the DSS and LXX). For the DSS, see Patrick W. Skehan and Eugene Ulrich, *Discoveries in the Judean Desert XIV: Qumran Cave 4: IX Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Kings*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995): 137-42. Recent commentaries include D. Christiansen, *Deuteronomy 21:10—24:12* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 809-21; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia & Jerusalem: 1996); and J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester & Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2002).

⁴⁸ The Enuma Elish is the primary example, and an English translation of the relevant sections may be found in *COS* 1, pp. 399-401.

⁴⁹ In the preparing this paper, I found a secondary observation that Sin was praised as the high god by a council (Kloos, *Yhwh’s Combat with the Sea*, 37), but I have not yet located a reference to a specific text.

⁵⁰ See Patrick D. Miller, *Genesis 1—11a: Studies in Structure and Theme*, JSOTSup, 8 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978), 9-18; S. B. Parker, “Sons of (the) God(s),” *DDD*, 797; Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*.

gods?") and even the Song of Deborah (Jud 5:20, "from the heaven the stars fought," = joint divine-human warfare). The fact that at least some of the texts were situated in Israel's Psalter for presumably temple worship is still an issue, in the sense that one must ask, "What were they doing and what were they expecting by telling these heavenly beings around God's throne to praise, bow, and bless him?"

The divine council is a part of heavenly, liturgical paradigm in the NT. Revelation 4—5 is the most comprehensive of all the celestial liturgy scenes in the NT. David Aune observed in his commentary on Revelation that "the focus on the throne vision is God enthroned in his heavenly court surrounded by a variety of angelic beings or lesser deities (angels, archangels, seraphim, cherubim) who function as courtiers. All such descriptions of God enthroned in the midst of his heavenly court are based on the ancient conception of the divine council or assembly found in Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Phoenicia as well as in Israel."⁵¹ Aune is not alone in his assessment: Joseph Baumgarten and perhaps Hans Bietenhard⁵² join him.⁵³ Without referring to the ANE background, Grant Osborne calls it the "heavenly council" charged with worship and ruling, which are two of the primary functions of the DC.⁵⁴ And while not calling it the primary ecclesial model for Christians, Larry Hurtado does write something quite close:

Additionally, the well-established usage of the term 'elder' to describe the leaders in the synagogues and churches of the late first century (if not earlier) seems to give us the most immediate association of the term for the first readers. That is, it does not seem difficult to think that the readers would have found the reference to heavenly 'elders' immediately meaningful on the basis of their familiarity with Jewish and Christian traditions, and would easily have taken these elders as playing a role in heaven similar to that of the earthly elders of Jewish and Christian groups The elders are probably not particular saints, such as Old Testament heroes, but are symbolic representations of the elect. They are heavenly archetypes, which serve as counterparts and representatives of the earthly saints⁵⁵

In addition, we should note that there is early Christian precedent for this kind of ecclesiological paradigm.⁵⁶

Scholars have argued for a variety of sources for the liturgy portrayed here, ranging from Jewish synagogues to Christian churches. However, I have been most persuaded by Beale's arguments for a strong OT background for this passage (as well as the rest of the book), and therefore I believe he is also correct when he writes, "John intended the readers to see what is told of in the vision as a heavenly pattern that the church is to reflect in its worship rather than the other way around (just as the heavenly pattern of the tabernacle shown to Moses on the mountain was to be copied by Israel in the construction of their own tabernacle)."⁵⁷

The point I am trying to make is that divine council provides the model not only for individuals, but more importantly for churches. It is our liturgical model, and the theology and practices found here should be the pattern for our own.

SUMMARY & APPLICATIONS

1. God is present in Christian liturgical assemblies. More important than *where* or *how* he is present is merely the fact that he *is* present. God's presence alone becomes the greatest defining theological motif and pastoral guide for liturgy. Based on other texts, we could add that divine messengers are also present with God, making Christian churches at worship a true bit of "heaven on earth."⁵⁸

⁵¹ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1—5* (Word, 1997), 277. Aune gives other references about the DC.

⁵² Hans Bietenhard, *Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum* (WUNT, 2; Tübingen, 1951), 56-63, following a reference in L. Hurtado, "Revelation 4—5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies," *JSNT* 25 (1985): 120.

⁵³ J. Baumgarten, "The Duodecimal Courts," 66-70.

⁵⁴ Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Baker, 2002), 229-30.

⁵⁵ Hurtado, "Revelation 4—5," 113-14.

⁵⁶ For instance, the Syrian bishop Ignatius of Antioch provides two of the earliest and clearest examples when he writes in *Magn* 6.1, "Be eager to do everything in godly harmony, the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place [*topos*] of the council of the apostles and the deacons" Ignatius also admonished another church in *Trall* 3.1, "Similarly, let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God's council and as the band of the apostles. Without these no group can be called a church." All quotations from the Apostolic Fathers are from *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harner, revised by Michael W. Holmes, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Hurtado lists Eph 2.2; 4.1; 20.2; Mag 2.1; 13.1; Tral 2.2; 7.2; 13.2; Philad 3.1 [?]; 5.1; 7.1; and Smyr 8.1 ("Revelation 4—5," 122).

⁵⁷ Beale, *Revelation*, 312.

⁵⁸ I do not want to press this issue in the same way that some Roman Catholic writers do, e.g., Scott Hahn. I think there are other holes in the Roman Catholic arguments, even though they have correctly seen the importance of celestial liturgy.

2. God imparts holiness to the place and the people where he is present. Even though Scripture shows that unholy people, including unbelievers, can be present in liturgy, the celestial liturgy points toward the fact that holy people are the only ones who can truly worship God.
3. God comes to speak, to save, and to judge. The Reformation was right to restore authoritative preaching to the Church's liturgy, even though it may have been done to excess at times. After establishing the necessity of God's presence among his people, reading and prophetic preaching of Scripture is a *sine qua non* for Christian liturgy. Although all the people of God are holy (and priests), this does not diminish the need for a divinely called preacher. Music is not essential to liturgy; preaching is.
4. Heavenly liturgy is neither a party nor a concert, nor is it primarily music-based. It is the response of the people of God to the presence, work, and word of God. The celestial liturgy of the divine council, especially as seen in the elders in the book of Revelation, provides us with biblical patterns for liturgy. It shows that holy individuals uniting in a common worship of God Most High is a core activity of heaven itself. They provide us with examples of praising God and physically, not just mentally or emotionally or mystically, entering into glorifying him. We have not been left to our own devices and imaginations or the mandates of the post-modern culture as many people since Charles G. Finney would have us to believe.⁵⁹ "The church as the throne of God, the minister as mediating his presence in the same way as the living creatures and elders in [Rev 4], is one antidote to this paucity of worship."⁶⁰
5. Heavenly liturgy inherently builds on key biblical doctrines, such as God as Creator, the Trinity, Christ's cosmic lordship, sin-salvation-redemption. Such worship rehearses and engages core doctrines and places the worshipers under God's authority. It is inherently non-mystical, even anti-mystical.⁶¹ Mystical worship (inadvertently?) subverts the focus on texts and doctrines by focusing instead on *perception*—the perception of experiencing God's presence. Such misguided worship also subtly opens congregations up forms of syncretism and pluralism.
6. The Lord's Supper is an important part of biblical liturgy, and congregations need to recover a frequent celebration that reflects the broad spectrum of theological themes present in this important ritual given to us by Christ, especially the future-directed themes. Just because we do not believe in transubstantiation and have different understandings about *where* the real presence of God is located (why does it have to be in the elements?) does not mean we should be afraid to remember Jesus in our weekly liturgies. If all of Scripture testifies to Jesus Christ, is there then any text which is inappropriate to use in remembering our Lord?
7. Prayer as prayer should have an important place in our services. It should not be merely decorative. The 'real prayer' should not be left to some time in a different service. If Christ has made the Church his temple, then it should still be true that we make his house 'a house of prayer.' Our prayers ought to reflect the priorities found in Scripture, beginning with the request for Christ to return and bring the fullness of his kingdom. Prayer is one of the sacrifices that are acceptable to God, who desires that 'no one appears before him empty-handed.'
8. Congregational singing is an important part of liturgy. It is the biblically mandated mode of musical expression in liturgy, but it functions under the above elements. Body, mind, and emotions of individuals join together in it. The music communicates emotively.⁶² This is why we can be certain that it does communicate, and yet have a hard time defining exactly what is being communicated. This is also why there can be different responses between groups of people. But the music in liturgy must be text-driven, i.e., the meaning and emotion of the text must provide the guidelines for the emotional character and general appropriateness of the music. The music ought to match and support the text. It is not the proper function of music to promote mystical worship, though it ought to reflect the attitudes of reverence and holiness, whether it is fast or slow, happy or sad, quiet or loud. In addition, the elder's possession of harps provides biblical support for the use of instrumental accompaniment to congregational singing in liturgy.⁶³

⁵⁹ "We find articulated in Finney a decisive departure from an important premise of Free Church worship. He was quite clear that the Bible does not prescribe specific forms for worship, only that 'there should be *decency and order*' (1 Cor. 14.40) [*Lectures on Revival*, 276]. Pragmatism has triumphed over Biblicism. The meaning of freedom has shifted from being free to follow scripture to being free to do what works." J. White, *Protestant Worship*, 177.

⁶⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 243.

⁶¹ Again, I am speaking about "mysticism" proper—see the earlier note; I am not at all attempting to argue that *mystery* has no place in Christian worship.

⁶² This is axiomatic. For the perspective of a recognized composer, see Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*.

⁶³ In addition to the paper noted at the beginning, this essay draws on work previously presented, including "When the gods Worship God: Divine Council Participation in Celestial Cult" (EGLBS, April 2007) and "Heavenly Models for Corporate Worship: Direction for Churches" (ETS, November 2006).