

ABRAHAM'S WORSHIP OF GOD
IN GENESIS 12-25

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The worship of God in the Holy Scriptures is a theme that is displayed throughout its pages as an essential part of the life of a believer. One of the earliest examples of such worship can be noted in the life of Abraham. Throughout the narratives of Genesis 12-25 Abraham's worship of God increases until it reaches a climax in chapter twenty-two.

The terminology of Abraham's worship of God is first considered as to its basic lexical meanings and also its meaning within the context of Abraham's life. True worship in Abraham's life can be defined as a submission to God involving both a way of life as well as obvious ceremonial practices. It is the ritual of Abraham's worship that is fascinating when compared with the ritual of the other nations of the ancient Near East. The places and practices of worship were in most cases very similar. Most of the sites chosen by God for Abraham's worship of Himself were sites that were already used by the Canaanites of that day. Also like the nations of his day, Abraham built altars, made sacrifices, addressed his God in prayer, and even physically kneeled in worship.

The attitudes that attended Abraham's worship were somewhat unique in his day. Part of his submission to God necessarily was made evident by his obedience, faith, devotion, thanksgiving and praise, and penitence before God. Worship was not just a ritual, because it also involved these attitudes as well as a proper response to other men around him. Abraham provided a witness for God wherever he stopped in worship because he naturally proclaimed the fact that Yahweh was truly God. Those who were family as well as close servants were taught how to worship God. The worship of God was an attitude but it also involved action.

Abraham's worship of God was a key part of his life, but only because of the work of God in his heart. Undoubtedly the most unique feature of Abraham's worship is contained in its theology. The sensuous, finite gods of Canaan were no match for Yahweh. He was the only God, yet He was also a sovereign, personal God, for He established the relationship with Abraham and became personally involved in every detail of his life. Yahweh needed nothing from Abraham, yet He sovereignly determined to select Abraham to be His servant. The experiences of Abraham, the names of Yahweh, and the personal revelations that were given to him by God are evidence of the personal nature of this relationship established by Yahweh. Abraham could do no less than worship Him.

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Adviser



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INTRODUCTION

The church today is responsible to carry out the will of God in the world. The worship of God is considered to be one of these basic responsibilities of glorifying God. Pastors and laymen alike voice their support for becoming involved in the practice of worship. The Scripture is filled with didactic passages concerning the worship of God. There is one significant problem with all of this. Because of a lack of a true biblical understanding of what worship is, there are very few who can actually define it. If few can define worship biblically, then it can be concluded that there are also few who truly worship God. If worship is so central to Scripture and so important for the believer today, should not there be a concerted effort to learn what worship is and quickly insert it as an imperative for the life of every believer?

The purpose of this paper is to determine biblically the true meaning of the worship of God in the life of Abraham. Genesis 12-25 will be the extent of the biblical content examined so that in the life of Abraham it can be ascertained what the worship of God was like in early times when worship was in a state of simplicity.

The procedure for determining the meaning of the worship of God in Abraham's time will be contained in four

chapters. The first chapter will consider the definition of Abraham's worship as contained in the meanings of key Hebrew words and phrases. The second chapter will consider the cultic rituals involved in his worship and will relate this to the practices of the other nations of the Ancient Near East. The third chapter will enumerate and explain in a brief way several of the attendant attitudes that accompanied worship in the life of Abraham. The final chapter will divulge the basic difference in the worship of Abraham and that of the other ancient Near Eastern nations. This will find expression in the theology of his worship.

It should be noted that all English quotations from the Bible are taken from the New International Version Bible.

CHAPTER I

DEFINITION OF ABRAHAM'S WORSHIP

Many studies about the subject of worship attempt to relate a great quantity of facts about worship without defining worship in its biblical setting. At the outset, worship must be defined lexically, exegetically, and contextually before any further aspects of the subject may be discussed.

The life of Abraham, recorded in Genesis 12-25, contains various words to refer to his worship of God. All of these words or phrases along with the total context of his life give aid to a greater understanding of what worship is.

The Hebrew Word חָרַת

The key Hebrew term for worship is חָרַת. Most sources that discuss this term claim that it is a Hithpalel from the root שָׁחָה, but Gordon and others have presented evidence that it is from the Ugaritic/Hebrew stem "hwy" and means "to bow down" or "to throw oneself down."¹ Throughout the Abraham narratives חָרַת is used with the Hishtaphel stem. Brown,

¹Cyrus H. Gordon, Ugaritic Textbook, In An. Or. 38 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), p. 395.

Driver, and Briggs list the root word as שׁחט and give the lexical meaning as "to bow down, prostrate oneself before a monarch or superior in homage, before God in worship, before other gods."¹ It is important to realize that the root is שׁחט, but the definition is synonymous to that of שׁחט.

Many times throughout the Old Testament it is used to express an actual physical prostration to the earth. In Nehemiah 8:6, Ezra read the law to the people who returned from exile, and all of the people "bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground." The posture is described in the word, but the meaning goes beyond a mere formal procedure. Ap-Thomas explained it well when he said that it is used frequently of homage or respect paid to a conqueror by the vanquished, to a master by a slave, or to a king by his subjects, but the majority of cases concern the attitude of prayer to Yahweh.² Whether there is a strong emphasis on prayer or not, Ap-Thomas is correct when he says that worship is like the Muslim sujud. The sujud finds the worshipper on his knees with his hands on the ground and his nose and forehead down upon them. This attitude puts the person at the entire mercy of his lord and is intended to show submission and compassion.³

¹BDB, p. 1005.

²D.R. Ap-Thomas, "Notes on Some Terms Relating to Prayer," VT 6 (1956):229.

³Ibid.

Prostration was quite common as an act of submission before a superior as evidenced in the Amarna letters and The Ancient Near East in Pictures.¹

In the Scripture, the context determines whether חָוָה is used for physical prostration before a superior or an inward act of prostration before a superior. In the chapters of Genesis in which Abraham is found, the word is found eight times, but only four of these relate directly to Abraham. All of these passages should be briefly considered to help determine the biblical meaning of worship.

The word חָוָה is first found in relation to Abraham in Genesis 18:2. Abraham was living at Hebron and was sitting in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day when there appeared three men before him. Many writers propose that Abraham did not know who they were at first, but because of his many previous meetings with the Lord, it is apparent that he instantly knew who the visitors were. His first reaction was to run from the tent and bow down before them. This physical act of prostration involved a worship of God and not a mere bowing to men. Genesis 19:1, the next occurrence of the word, uses it in relation to Lot. The two angels went to the city of Sodom and there Lot bowed down to them. Once again, the physical act appears to denote a recognition that they were more than just men. Lot's care for the two angels even at great risk to his entire family demonstrates at least an element of worship which was

¹TWOT, s.v. "חָוָה," by Edwin Yamauchi, p. 268.

probably learned from Abraham.

Probably the greatest single passage in the life of Abraham relating to the subject of worship is found in Genesis 22:5. There God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac and Abraham immediately obeyed. When they arrived near the place of the sacrifice, Abraham told his two servants that he and Isaac were going to worship. It is very clear that the worship involved a worship of God without physical prostration as a necessity. Worship then need not involve a physical act though one is often present.

Genesis 23:7,12 record the events of Abraham's life when he sought land for a burying place for his wife. He bowed down before the people of the land who were Hittites. כָּרַע basically involves a physical act before humans in this context, but there is an element of worship in the general sense also involved in Abraham's act. This will become more clear as the evidence progresses.

The last three usages of כָּרַע in the Abraham narratives are found in Genesis 24:26,48,52. All three of these verses record the actions of Abraham's servant who was sent to Nahor to find a wife for Isaac. The Lord clearly answered the servant's request to show him the right girl, and as a result, the servant bowed and worshipped Yahweh. There are two verbs used in verses 26 and 48 to describe this action. The first verb, קָרַע, means to bow down and the second, כָּרַע, means to worship. In all three of the verses the servant's worship was directed toward Yahweh who had directed

him to Rebekah. The servant responded with worship toward Abraham's God who had also become his God.

As קָרַח continued to be used throughout time in biblical writings, it continued to refer to a bowing down before God, false gods, or men. The theological implication connected with this term is "recognition by the worshipper of some notable quality or characteristic in the object being worshipped."¹ This can be seen in Abraham's life in his bowing down to the Hittites whom he recognized as the rightful owners of the land which he sought to buy. It can also be seen in his worship of Yahweh in the land of Moriah when he was commanded to sacrifice his only son Isaac.

In classical literature the word קָרַח was translated by προσκυνέω and had a basic meaning of "to kiss." The prefix indicates a connection with cultic practices going back beyond Greek history. The evidence of this was found on Egyptian reliefs where worshippers are represented with outstretched hands throwing kisses to a deity. Among the Greeks the verb is a technical term for adoration of the gods, meaning to fall down, prostrate oneself, or adore on one's knees. The meaning probably came from having to bow to the ground to kiss the earth (earth deity) or the image of a god.² The Septuagint consistently translated קָרַח with

¹Robert Oelschlagel, "Israelite Worship Prior to the Tabernacle" (Old Testament History: Postgraduate Seminar, Grace Theological Seminary, vol. 27 pt. 2, Fall 1974), p. 4.

²NIDNTT, s.v. " προσκυνέω ," by H. Schonweiss and C. Brown, 2:875-76.

the Greek word προσκυνέω and gives aid in further understanding what worship is in the biblical record, especially in relation to Abraham.

When all of the passages in Abraham's life are considered along with the Hebrew word כָּנָה and the Greek word προσκυνέω it becomes clear that worship is not some ether-eal concept that can be discussed but not defined; it is very concrete in its basic intent. Many writers do not confront the heart of the issue. For instance, Crannell says that "the OT idea is therefore the reverential attitude of mind or body or both, combined with the generic notions of religious adoration, obedience, service."¹ Crannell speaks of some of the elements of worship that will be discussed later in this paper, but does not succinctly define worship. When speaking of worship of God, Herbert comes much closer when he says, "Worship may be defined as the recognition and acknowledgement at every level of human nature of the absolute worth of God."² It is not merely words or actions that are central, but those in response to God who discloses Himself to man.

If worship was to be defined by one word it would have to be the word "submission." Whether the word is used in a context referring to God, false gods, or men, there is always a submission to the one who is being worshipped.

¹ISBE, s.v. "Worship," by Philip Wendell Crannell, p. 3110.

²A.S. Herbert, Worship in Ancient Israel (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), p. 47.

When Abraham bowed down to the Hittites he recognized them for who they were and submitted to them as the owners of the land. Most of the usages of הִשָּׁתַּחֲוֶה in Abraham's life refer to a worship of God. To worship God was to recognize who He is and bow down or submit willingly to His will as He revealed it to man. It was much more than a mere physical act of prostration. It was an attitude that involved heart motives and usually resulted in some physical action as well because of the working of God in the life of the man.

It is obvious from Genesis 18:2 that Abraham reacted to the appearance of the three visitors with more than just physical gestures. He willingly with the heart submitted to them by meeting their needs and according to verse eight he stood by while they ate. He was also intent on listening to what he was told and of submitting to that declaration from the Lord. In Genesis 19:1, Lot could have left the two angels in the street, but he displayed more than an ordinary hospitality when he invited to take them into his own home and protect them. He evidently recognized them as God's messengers and desired to submit to them.

When Abraham took his son Isaac to the land of Moriah to sacrifice him, he told his servants that they were going to worship and then return. Abraham responded to the revealed will of God with a submissive inward attitude and outward action. Yahweh told him to take Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering on the mountain there and Abraham willingly submitted. This is evidenced by the fact that he rose

early the next day and traveled for three days and finally even raised the knife to kill his son. Worship is demonstrated by his willing submission to the revealed will of God.

Abraham's servant is another paradigm of true worship of God. In Genesis 24 he could have questioned God's leading in some way, but instead he willingly and joyously submitted to God's direction and strove to secure Rebekah as a wife for Isaac.

The use of *חנה* is limited in the life of Abraham but it is clearly understood to be an obedient or submissive response to the commands and promises of God. If worship is not determined by the revealed will of God then it is not true worship at all.¹ Since worship involves both God and man, the initiative in worship must come from God but the response must come forth from the whole man through inward attention and outward expression.

The Hebrew Phrases *נפל על פנים* and

קרא בשם יהוה

Besides the key word for worship, there are other terms and phrases that are necessary to consider briefly when delineating a proper biblical definition of worship. Many passages, such as those relating directly to altars and sacrifices, will not be considered until a later portion of the paper. At this point the two phrases "fall on the face"

¹C.E.B. Cranfield, "Divine and Human Action: The Biblical Concept of Worship," *Int* 12 (October 1958):388.

and "call on the name of the Lord" will be reviewed in the Abraham narratives.

The phrase נפל על פנים is used four times in the book of Genesis and twice in the life of Abraham. Both occurrences are found in chapter seventeen when El Shaddai revealed Himself to Abraham and promised him a great increase of numbers and gave him a responsibility of keeping the covenant made between them. The Lord appeared and said in verse two "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." It was then that Abraham fell face down or upon his face. It is evident that this physical act of prostration was an outward sign of an inward submission to the revealed will of God. The Lord gave both a command and a promise and Abraham responded to them in a worshipful manner. In verse seventeen Abraham responded in a similar manner when Yahweh told him that Sarah would have a son. It appears that when Abraham laughed it must have been laughter of joyous submission instead of unbelief as some say. If this is not so then Abraham fell face down before Yahweh in mock worship instead of true worship.

The other significant phrase utilized in the Abraham narratives is קרא בשם יהוה. It is used three times and finds Abraham as the one calling on the name of Yahweh. Abraham arrived at his second stopping place in the land of Canaan in Genesis 12:8 and there called on the name of

Yahweh. The word קרא denotes primarily the enunciation of a specific vocable or message and also connotes calling one to a specific task.¹ Raven suggests that prayer rather than sacrifice is meant when this phrase is used.² Rainey suggests that, "The association of the phrase with the building of an altar shows that it refers to the approach to God through sacrifice."³ Leupold probably says it best when he agrees with the lexicons that interpret it to mean "to use the name of Yahweh in worship." The ק expresses a kind of means--to call out by use of the name.⁴

In the Old Testament the word "name" is more significant than it is in modern language. "The concept of personal names in the OT often included existence, character, and reputation (1 Sam. 25:25)." The name chosen for a child was often descriptive of the parents wishes or expectations for the personality that was to mature.⁵ Yahweh is the great theme of Old Testament name theology. "The name of Yahweh, indeed, is such a powerful expression of his personal rule and activity that it can be used as an alternative way of

¹ TWOT, s.v. "קרא," by Leonard J. Coppes, p. 810.

² John Howard Raven, The History of the Religion of Israel (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 15.

³ ZPEB, s.v. "Sacrifice and Offerings," by A.F. Rainey, p. 209.

⁴ H.C. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 227.

⁵ TWOT, s.v. "שם," by Walter C. Kaiser, p. 934.

speaking of Yahweh himself."¹ Leviticus 18:21; Psalm 7:17; Amos 2:7; Micah 5:4 present clear evidence to this truth. Psalm 7:17 using synonymous parallelism says, "I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High." The name of Yahweh thus can be understood as referring to Yahweh Himself who reveals Himself to men so that they will in turn call on His name, or actually, worship Him. Much of the way in which He revealed His character was through His names and Yahweh was one of the most significant revealed to Abraham.

Abraham did not invent a new thing when he began to call on the name of Yahweh. In Genesis 4:26 men first began to call on the name of Yahweh and thus it appears that Abraham learned this from some influence carried on through the years and maybe adopted by the pagan nations in the worship of their gods. Abraham evidently called on the name of Yahweh both as a response to His revelation and to his own need because of the presence of original sin in his own life. The phrase may also be used frequently to designate public worship but in the life of Abraham this is unclear whether it was a public or private thing. It can be surmised that public worship was a regular thing though because of the essence of worship, submission before God, and because of the influence upon the lives of both Isaac and Abraham's servant. They learned what worship was from someone and it was very likely from Abraham.

¹NIDNTT, s.v. "ὄνομα," by H. Bietenhard, p. 649.

Genesis 13:4 is similar to 12:8 because there Abraham returned to the altar between Bethel and Ai. He had traveled to Egypt during a famine and while he was there he lied about Sarah to protect himself. When he returned to the place of the altar he again submitted to his Lord. In Genesis 21:33, the third usage of *קרא בשם יהוה* is found when Abraham had made a treaty with Abimelech concerning a well. There at Beersheba Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and called on the name of Yahweh. He established another special site of worship there.

From the passages that have been examined, worship in Abraham's life can be seen as central to his relationship to God. Submission, not solely because of duty, but because of a heart desire is what true worship is all about. It is marked by certain special times and places for worship, yet never denies that worship is also a way of life for the man of God as he continually submits to the revealed will of God.

CHAPTER II

RITUAL OF ABRAHAM'S WORSHIP

The ritual or the forms of worship are the most noticeable features of any type of worship. The case is no different in the time of Abraham or at any other time in the history of the Old Testament. When questioned concerning the similarities of the worship forms of Abraham and of those nations surrounding Abraham, most would say that the similarities are very few. What is startling upon a closer study is that there are actually very few differences in the forms of worship. There were certainly some differences though for ". . . Israel, apparently from the beginning, repudiated certain normal features of Semitic religion, e.g. ritual fornication and human sacrifice."¹ The basic difference will be explained later to be the fact that Yahweh was a personal, sovereign God as compared to the gods of the Canaanites.

While there are distinctives in Abraham's worship and the worship of the surrounding Canaanites, the peculiarities lie not so much in the practice as in the meaning associated with the practice. Herbert has said ". . . that

¹Herbert, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 6.

the various cultic practices of Israel have their close parallels in the religions of Canaan" ¹ Abraham did not necessarily derive his cultic practices from surrounding peoples; they simply used common worship forms. Abraham used a particular worship form to worship the true God, whereas the Canaanites used the same forms to worship their false gods. Actually, it should be assumed that at least some of the worship forms had their beginning with Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. These early worship forms became more widespread and more distorted both in their practice and purpose by pagan nations.

By the time of Abraham all worship forms were not exactly as they were in Abel's time but that was not necessarily wrong. As Rowley has said, "The Old Testament covers a very long period, and neither the forms nor the spirit remained unchanged throughout the period." ² The forms of worship underwent great change, especially by a growth in the complexity of the ritual act and word. Both form and attitude were necessary to express true worship for attitude must be expressed by action. The important thing to understand is that the forms of worship were important, but could change but the spirit of worship was never to change as it related to God. This chapter will consider the recognized and formal worship forms practiced by Abraham, as well as by

¹Ibid.

²H.H. Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel (London: S.P.C.K., 1967), p. 3.

the Canaanites. Worship in its cultus was adaptable to the considerable variety of social experiences through which it passed, nomadic and agricultural, tribal and national, independent and subject to alien empires.¹ The acts of Abraham and those to follow him were visible acts, but more than that, they effectively conveyed something from man to God. They were symbolic acts that were not for the purpose of coercing God, but to bring the worshipper to God by the means which He has commanded.² This statement by Herbert cannot be completely supported in the life of Abraham because there is no evidence that God commanded the forms of worship practiced. The basic form of worship found when the word "סָחַק" is used is that of physically bowing down to God.

This chapter will consider various cultic practices that Abraham became involved in. It will cover the issues of sacred sites and trees. It will of course be concerned with the central subjects of altars and sacrifice. The elements of posture and prayer will also be discussed. The attitudes underlying these things will not be discussed in detail here, for chapter three will further elucidate these significant subjects.

¹Herbert, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 48.

²Ibid., p. 15.

Places of Worship

Sacred Sites

Sacred sites for worship were well known to the ancient Canaanite people. Millard said that devout Canaanites would worship in temples of various patterns. The high place was an open-air shrine on a hilltop. In towns a mound of earth or stones could represent the natural hillock for worship sites.¹ Ringgren explained that the cult took place in the open, but partly in regular temples. Trees and groves were regarded as holy and marked cultic sites for the Canaanites because places where trees grew had a special life force. These places were marked with stone pillars or wooden poles as well as altars.² When scholars understand the Canaanite emphasis upon special sacred sites, many are often quick to explain that Abraham was just following the ways of the Canaanites and worshipping their gods at their established sites. Is there any biblical evidence for such a claim?

It does appear to be true that the patriarchs stopped at sites considered to be sacred by the Canaanites. These places had probably already existed as sacred sites for long ages before Abraham entered Canaan. If they were typical Canaanite sites they undoubtedly were marked with

¹A.R. Millard, "The Canaanites," in Peoples of Old Testament Times, ed. D.J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 44.

²Helmer Ringgren, Religions of the Ancient Near East, trans. John Sturdy (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), p. 158.

distinctive features of such a religion. Some of the things Abraham may have seen were massebahs, asherim, altars, sacred trees, sacred waters, and possibly buildings.¹ What were the sites at which Abraham worshipped and why did he choose them?

Shechem

Genesis 12:6 says, "Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. The Canaanites were then in the land." The first site at which Abraham stopped was the city of Shechem, located between mounts Ebal and Gerizim at the crossroads of central Palestine. This was an important city as seen from Brussels figurines dating from the reign of Sesostriis III (1878-1843 B.C.) and so must have been in existence even in Abraham's time.² Abraham stopped at the עץ מורא of מורא or the terebinth of Moreh where the Canaanite Baal was worshipped at least in later times and maybe in patriarchal times with a fortress-temple type sanctuary.³ It is not certain exactly what kind of tree was there. Whether it was an oak, or a terebinth, or some other type of great tree, it is apparent that it marked a shrine and hence a topographical

¹Ignatius Hunt, The World of the Patriarchs (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 74.

²Jacob M. Myers, "The Way of the Fathers," Int 29 (April 1975):125.

³Andre Parrot, Abraham and His Times, trans. James H. Farley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 69.

designation. The term מורה is regarded by tradition as a personal name meaning "guiding, oracular."¹ If this is true there was apparently a teacher or diviner who gave counsel to the people from under the great tree.

Bethel

Genesis 12:8 says, "From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord." Bethel was a key site and stopping point because it was on the north-south watershed road of Palestine and also a key point on the east-west route from the Transjordan west by way of Jericho through the Aijalon Valley to the Mediterranean Sea. The bare mountain tops and the springs of water near the top of the ridge of hills made the site desirable from early days. It was an occupied area from at least 3500 B.C.²

Hebron

Genesis 13:18 mentions Abraham's third place of worship when it says, "So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the Lord." Hebron was another site along the southern journey through the land and was evidently important as the mention of great trees is made again. It is

¹E.A. Speiser, Genesis, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), p. 87.

²ZPEB, s.v. "Bethel," by H.M. Jamieson, p. 531.

uncertain what the name Mamre comes from though it has been suggested that maybe the place was named after the man mentioned in Genesis 14:13,24.¹ Mamre was an Amorite ally of Abraham's when he rescued Lot from the eastern confederation of kings.

Beersheba

Genesis 21:33 speaks of the only place that Abraham seemed to have established a previously unused place of worship. It says, "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God."

Abraham worshipped at no less than four major sites, not including the region of Moriah. It cannot be said that he adopted the worship sites of the Canaanites because of a respect or even worship of their gods. The sanctuaries used by the patriarchs were revered spots because they were visited by theophanies. Patriarchal sacrifices, and thus worship were basically limited to the places in which God chose to reveal Himself. It was because God personally spoke to Abraham at these places that he decided to worship in them.

"As to altars without theophanies, such rare cases are to be explained in recognition, either of a theophany immediately preceding, or of some related type of divine

¹ZPEB, s.v. "Mamre," by R.L. Alder, p. 48.

intervention or activity."¹ In all five of the locations mentioned as worship sites for Abraham this is found to be true. When he built the altar near Bethel it followed God's revelation to him and the building of the altar at Shechem. At Hebron, Yahweh had just spoken to him and at Beersheba, He had worked in Abraham's behalf and led him to a new dwelling place. In Moriah there was a very clear revelation which Abraham responded to. Even de Vaux agrees that the sanctuaries used by the patriarchs were erected principally in places where God had shown Himself in a theophany.²

Myers and Albright miss the emphasis of the biblical text when they argue that Abraham was a caravaneer between Damascus and Egypt and the places associated with him were basically trading posts or centers located on highways over which merchants plied their trade.³ Roland de Vaux makes many excellent statements concerning Abraham's places of worship, but mistakenly concludes that the cult of the Canaanite sanctuaries was continued and only later changed from the worship of the Canaanite god, El, to Yahweh.⁴ Of course, there is no evidence in Genesis that Abraham ever worshipped any Canaanite god after Yahweh called him to the

¹J. Barton Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 360.

²Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel, vol. 2: Religious Institutions (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), p. 289.

³Myers, "The Way of the Fathers," p. 125.

⁴de Vaux, Ancient Israel, p. 293.

land of Canaan.

In conclusion to this matter, it can be assumed that these truly were Canaanite worship sites when Abraham arrived at them but he stopped because it was there that Yahweh spoke to him. As Kidner says, ". . . it was a foretaste of things to come that at this stronghold of other gods the Lord revealed His presence, allocated the land to His servant and received formal homage."¹ The sites at which Abraham bowed before his God were often the same sites chosen earlier by the Canaanites, so there was no basic difference as to where the two worshipped. The religion in its essence was vastly different but the places were not.

More will be said concerning this issue in chapter three as it relates to why God chose these Canaanite worship sites for His servant, Abraham, to worship Him. It may be briefly mentioned here that they were selected so that Abraham might witness to the Canaanites of the true God who did reveal Himself, while demonstrating that the Canaanite deities were unable to defend themselves even within their own strongholds. Yahweh was truly God.

Sacred Trees

Along with the sacred sites where Abraham worshipped there is a mention of special trees in three instances. There was a Semitic belief that trees and especially

¹Derek Kidner, Genesis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 115.

evergreens were regarded as vehicles of the life-producing energy of spirits and later of gods and goddesses. These trees were used in animistic worship as a symbol of the deity or his sanctuary or as marking the site of a sanctuary. Oesterley relates that the cypress was sacred to the Phoenician goddess, Astarte, and he thus believed that the Hebrew religion adopted Phoenician worship practices and passed through an animistic stage of belief.¹ Sacred trees were especially frequent in Mesopotamian iconography as symbols of fertility or as closely associated with fertility gods, but, according to de Vaux, it is questionable if the trees ever represented the gods because they were not worshipped.²

Widengren favored the idea that in Mesopotamia there were cult trees which were located near or in the sanctuaries and were symbolic of some deity or deities.³ He believed that the Western Semitic religions received similar ideas from Mesopotamia and also Egypt. The king is pictured holding as his scepter the Plant of Life or a branch from the Tree of Life and thus he was able to impart life to his subjects who knelt as supplicants before him. Life could be acquired by partaking of this Plant of Life.⁴ It is

¹W.E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930; reprint ed., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), pp. 23-26.

²de Vaux, Ancient Israel, p. 278.

³George Widengren, "The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion," UUA 4 (1951):9.

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

debatable as to whether this Tree of Life concept was present in Canaan at the time of Abraham, but it is possible that some fabric of the original Tree of Life story was present among the pagan peoples of Canaan. If it was, then they could have inculcated it into their own religion and have seen these trees as representative of their deity or king from whom they could receive life. It seems best to see these trees in the life of Abraham as only part of an established worship site where Abraham worshipped and proclaimed Yahweh to the Canaanites. Maybe a tree was as much in form a part of worship then as a steeple on a church building is a part of worship today. Abraham was not opposed to the form of Canaanite worship if there was nothing questionable about it.

Evidently, the Canaanites worshipped at sites where their gods were attested to have worked some supernatural act through nature. Either the great tree or trees were already there or else they were planted and used as places for worship for a long period of time before Abraham arrived in Canaan. Genesis 12:6 presents the clearest evidence of previous Canaanite worship at Shechem. The writer went out of the way to identify the site as being the great tree of Moreh and then proceeded to relate that the Canaanites were then present in the land. Genesis 13:18 mentions the great trees of Mamre and seems to speak of a grove of trees. The Massoretic text used the plural of "tree" in this case though the Septuagint translated it as a singular noun. The

third instance of a supposed sacred tree was the one planted by Abraham at Beersheba.

The question arises as to whether the sacred trees were absorbed as a part of Abraham's worship. There is no evidence that Abraham united with the Canaanites in their worship practices. The trees are mentioned in the scriptural text to aid the reader in understanding that Yahweh spoke to His servant provoking worship from him in places where pagan worship was prevalent. There was a very significant reason for this but it will not be presented until chapter three.

The three occasions in which trees are mentioned in the Abraham narratives should be briefly considered here to demonstrate that Abraham held no sacred opinion of the trees themselves. The tree of Moreh at Shechem was evidently an ancient sacred tree where oracles were delivered to the worshippers. Because of this many people probably lived nearby and thus it would have been a natural spot for Abraham to halt temporarily his southward journey through the land. It was on a travel route and was populated and thus Abraham stopped there. Yahweh chose to speak to him at that point and Abraham worshipped at the recognized place of worship. There is no indication that he used the tree in his worship, but there is clear evidence that he worshipped Yahweh. At the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, the same thing can be understood as with the tree of Moreh. They were evidently used for sacred Canaanite worship but Abraham worshipped

Yahweh there.

The only real problem with Abraham and a sacred tree occurs in Genesis 21:33 where he planted an עֵץ. Brown, Driver, and Briggs say that perhaps this was a sacred tree, marking a shrine.¹ It is often translated as a tamarisk tree but was it sacred for worship? Stigers seems to have answered this best when he said that, "the long-lived character of the tamarisk tree is a fitting memorial to Yahweh as the everlasting God, the God of everlasting grace, i.e. His promises will not fail."² Abraham planted it simply as a memorial to Yahweh because of the manner in which He worked out the treaty with Abimelech. It is also probable that Abraham planted a tree because it was the customary ritualistic form present in that day. Places of worship were marked by certain trees and thus Abraham did the same without taking any paganistic meanings from the Canaanites. The tree did not represent God to Abraham.

Abraham did not worship trees or utilize trees in his cultic practices when he worshipped. He simply worshipped the true God at sites where the Canaanites worshipped their false gods or else as in Genesis 21:33 he planted a memorial to his great God.

¹BDB, p. 79.

²Harold G. Stigers, A Commentary on Genesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 187.

Practices of Worship

Building Altars

The altar was an essential element in the sanctuary of both the Canaanite and Abraham. It is probably the most similar aspect that both religions evidenced in their worship. It was a necessary part of a complete worship experience in Abraham's day. Apparently altars had been built from very early days in man's history and later perverted in their use by men who did not know God. The earliest usage of the Hebrew word מִזְבֵּחַ is found in Genesis 8:20 where upon disembarking from the ark, Noah built an altar. Much worship after Noah's time was corrupted and evidently Abraham attained his knowledge of altar building from his pagan background in Ur. Pagan altars of all types have been discovered in Canaanitish Palestine. An altar was normally speaking a raised structure with a flat top on which offerings to a deity were placed or sacrifices were made.¹ Altars were made of various things and because they were built by Abraham, it signified that they were very important in the worship of Abraham because he did not even build a home for himself. Abraham lived in easily movable tents but constructed his altars as indicated by the verb בָּנָה.

As de Vaux has pointed out מִזְבֵּחַ comes from the verbal root meaning "to slaughter" which led to the meaning "to slaughter with a view to sacrifice" and finally led to

¹ZPEB, s.v. "Altar," by E.M. Blaiklock, p. 119.

the meaning of "a place where men offered sacrifices whatever their nature."¹ The altars could be made on the natural surface of a rock, a rock that was hewn out for the purpose, or on an altar built of stone as were Abraham's. Parrot pointed out that the altar was designed to accommodate the sacrifice offered to the deity.²

Abraham built altars at three of the four sites at which he dwelt and it may be safely said that they were significant for the same reasons as adherents of other ancient religions built altars, but with appreciable nuances. The apparent rule for legitimating Abraham's altars as true sanctuaries was because of a theophany at each place.³ The altars established by him at Shechem, Bethel, and Hebron were symbols of his encounter with God and memorials of his spiritual experience. The building of an altar was the general way for a worshipper to communicate with God. Blaiklock goes so far as to assert that approach to the Deity could not be made without the altar.⁴ This does not take into account instances like Genesis 18 where Abraham walked along with Yahweh and interceded directly with Him for the city of Sodom. It is true though that altars were very important.

¹de Vaux, Ancient Israel, p. 406.

²Parrot, Abraham and His Times, p. 71.

³John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), p. 246.

⁴ZPEB, s.v. "Altar," by E.M. Blaiklock, p. 120.

The altars built by Abraham were certainly for the worship of Yahweh and it can be assumed that like the nations he used them for sacrifices. This becomes more evident as he walked along with his son, Isaac, in Genesis 22. Verse seven demonstrates that Isaac was very familiar with sacrificial practices for he stated, "The fire and wood are here," but then he questioned, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Altars were a significant part of the cultus of Abraham's worship and were basically copied after the manner of the Canaanites. The only basic difference in their use was the object of their worship. Abraham used his altars to worship Yahweh.

Sacrifice

Altars were of enormous significance in the days of Abraham mainly because they served the purpose of being the places where sacrifices were made. The Canaanite purposes of making sacrifices were different than the views of the patriarchs when they sacrificed to their God. Payne lists four aspects of the Canaanite view of sacrifice which should be noted here.¹ To the Canaanites, a sacrifice was food for the god. Some attempt to point to Genesis 8:20 as such a sacrifice when Noah offered a burnt offering to God and as verse twenty-one says, it was a pleasing aroma. A second aspect of pagan sacrifice seemed to have involved both human

¹Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament, pp. 382-83.

sacrifice and cultic prostitution. Neither of these were a part of Abraham's pattern of making sacrifice to his God. Genesis 22 was an unusual instance when Abraham almost sacrificed his son. Verse one notes that this was a test though and was meant to demonstrate his utter devotion to Yahweh. A third view of Canaanite sacrifice was that it involved a physical communion with their gods. The fourth aspect of their sacrifice was that it was propitiatory or atoning in its effect.

Actually, the purposes of making sacrifices were somewhat different with the Canaanites and Abraham but the material differences seem to be very slight. Naturally, the cultic prostitution and human sacrifice were not a part of Abraham's worship but many other things were similar. Abraham probably took much of what he knew of sacrifice from the Canaanite people. It is interesting to note that throughout the Old Testament, the "Bible does not condemn the cult because of the rites it entailed, but because it was offered in illegitimate sanctuaries or to deities other than Yahweh."¹ The second reason that de Vaux presents here appears to be the best of the two.

It is necessary to stop for a moment and note that the verb זָבַח which is used for sacred slaughter is not found in the book of Genesis until after the time of Abraham. This does not mean that Abraham did not make sacrifices to God, for as has already been pointed out in Genesis 22,

¹de Vaux, Ancient Israel, p. 438.

Abraham and Isaac were both very familiar with the objects necessary for making a sacrifice. They took the fire, wood, and knife and knew that in Palestine there was never a lack of building materials. The lamb was the normal sacrifice for such an occasion.

Sacrifice is preeminently the gift of men to a God who deserves their gratitude and receives their devotion.¹ Cave remarked that it is "a gift to god--a surrender to Jehovah of what has cost the offerer something."² Sacrifice which was so essential to Abraham's worship could never be costless. The ultimate example of that fact occurred when Abraham was found willing to offer his son Isaac for a sacrifice. The value of that gift was of supreme value as evidenced not by the completed act, but by the perfect attitude. The sacrifices of Abraham were not directed toward a selfish deity, or offered as a meal for the deity, or for the purpose of achieving union with the god. The sacrifice was instead an outward expression of worship demonstrating that man owes everything to God. In sacrifice he would give what was needed to support life and what was a part of his own life in a sense. He would take this object and offer it for it to be slaughtered or destroyed. The destruction of the object by burning symbolized the giving of the offering

¹George Buchanan Gray, Sacrifice in the Old Testament, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky, The Library of Biblical Studies (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1971), p. 92.

²Alfred Cave, The Scriptural Doctrine of Sacrifice (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1877), p. 27.

to God by transferring it to the realm of the invisible. The destruction or consummation of the animal also had the effect of making the offering a useless and therefore irrevocable gift; thus it was a sacrifice indeed. Lawlor added as further purposes of sacrifices that the one who offered it demonstrated his complete faith and utter dependence upon Jehovah. He also noted that the shedding of blood was the Divine method of restoring severed fellowship.¹ This second purpose can be understood in Genesis 13:4 when Abraham returned to the altar between Bethel and Ai after leaving a poor testimony in Egypt. Fellowship needed restoration after his sin of lying to Pharoah.

"The patriarchal offerings were the expression of their individual veneration for the deity and the vehicle of their personal worship rather than their participation in an established cultus."² "Sacrifice was a widespread form of religious worship, and it is not to be wondered at that the patriarchs should express their veneration for God in ways similar to those of the people around them, by sacrifice."³ It was the normal reaction when a divine or angelic visitor approached or the worshipper desired to call on God's name, to approach by sacrifice to manifest an awe of God. Very

¹John Lawlor, "The Old Testament Concept of Sacrifice" (Old Testament Theology: Postgraduate Seminar, Grace Theological Seminary, vol. 13, Fall 1967), p. 16.

²Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 25.

³Ibid.

little is mentioned in the Abraham narratives concerning the form of the sacrifice. Attention is drawn rather to the spirit of response to the approach of God to Abraham or to his desire to approach God by calling upon His name. Sacrifice for Abraham was not a mere form of worship, but was a genuine expression of his spirit and sense of God's presence. He made sacrifices to God only because of the sovereign and personal work of grace God had performed in his life.

Sacrifice was essential to true worship but the form was not well-defined. This is recognized by noticing how some sacrifices changed their character over a period of time with the ritual having a tendency toward growth. It can be accepted by true believers that Abraham did adopt much of his sacrificial ritual from the Canaanites of his day. The form of their sacrifice could be very similar without being immoral, unless Abraham practiced cultic prostitution or something similar in his worship. Of course, Abraham was not involved in licentious practices even though his sacrifices were similar to the Canaanites in form. Hebrew ritual was much closer to Canaanite ritual than that of Mesopotamia, Arabia, or Egypt.¹ The basic difference with Canaanite practice was found in the motivation for sacrifice. Abraham worshipped God through sacrifice for several reasons as mentioned above. He sacrificed basically based upon the revelation of God in submission, thanksgiving, and penitence to God.

¹Hunt, The World of the Patriarchs, p. 79.

Since the motivation was such an important part of Abraham's sacrifices to God, it would be expedient to glance briefly at the biblical accounts of Abraham's sacrifices to determine what prompted each. When Abraham first made a sacrifice to Yahweh at Shechem, it followed Yahweh's rehearsal of His great promises to Abraham that he would be a great nation, have a great name, be a blessing to others, and be a blessing to all peoples on earth. As Abraham arrived at Shechem and viewed the land, God promised it for his offspring and Abraham built an altar. The basic motivation for worship at this point in Abraham's life must have been out of praise and thanksgiving. The setting changes little in Genesis 12:8 which demonstrates further thanksgiving as he explored the land further. Genesis 13:4 places an emphasis upon a sacrifice performed basically out of penitence for sin in Egypt. Genesis 13:18 appears to once again relate to the motive of thanksgiving. Lot had separated from Abraham, but God again spoke and promised him that all the land he saw would be for him and his offspring. Genesis 22 and the testing of Abraham points directly to the heart of all of his worship and sacrifice. The overriding motivation there and in all of the instances when examined closely is that of submission to his God. These motivations or attitudes will be considered more closely in chapter three of this thesis.

One particular type of sacrifice or offering that should be examined more closely is the *על* or whole burnt

offering. In later times in Israelite history, particularly in the book of Leviticus, many other special types of sacrifices are explained as to their purpose and ritual. In the Abraham narratives only one kind is mentioned by name and that is עֹלָה . It comes from the verb עָלָה and is the most prominent and frequently mentioned Old Testament sacrifice. Its basic meaning refers to that which goes up. "Clearly the thought behind this goes back to an early conception of the god consuming the food rising to him by means of the smoke."¹ Whether this is true or not it is clear that in Abraham's mind he did not conceive of his offering as food rising to God. For Abraham's worship the key difference in this type of sacrifice and others was that the whole burnt offering was wholly burned rather than partially burned and eaten by himself or his family. This type of offering was unknown in Mesopotamian cults but was common among the Canaanites where parallels are found in Ugaritic evidence.² To Abraham the whole burnt offering symbolized his complete devotion to Yahweh.

The lamb was an appropriate victim for the עֹלָה as is evidenced in Genesis 22:7 by Isaac's question, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" The offering of the lamb as a whole burnt offering was the most perfect type of sacrifice that could be presented because it represented the

¹Herbert, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 17.

²TWOT, s.v. " עֹלָה ," by G. Lloyd Carr, p. 666.

act of committal that should accompany the offering. The burning of the animal was only secondary to the complete surrender evidenced when the whole creature was given to God. According to Carr, it was first presented as a gift to Yahweh, then the worshipper identified himself with the animal by placing his hand on the animal's head, and then he killed it.¹ It was the worshipper who was wholly committing himself to Yahweh.

It is not difficult to understand that Abraham was faced with the supreme test when he was told to take Isaac and sacrifice him as an *עֹלָה*. To have to take his son on a three day journey and there build an altar, place his son on it, then kill and burn him would be a supreme sacrifice. Abraham conformed to God's command not only in his inner man but also by his outward actions, for he truly went and built an altar as Genesis 22:9 says and laid Isaac on the wood. He even raised the knife and would have killed his son if God had not stopped him. The outward ritual that he performed proved the inward motivation of willing submission was real. Both the inward motivation and the outward act were necessary for it to be a true sacrifice to God.

A final point to take notice of concerning sacrifice was how God responded to it. The only instance where there is a clear response from God came in Genesis 22. All of the other sacrifices previously made were true sacrifices in which Abraham submitted to God and evidently divine

¹Ibid.

acceptance played a prominent part, but Genesis 22 reveals Abraham's most difficult sacrifice and a response from God that manifested His pleasure with it. It was only because of the personal working of God in his life that Abraham was able to make such a sacrifice. Abraham raised the knife and was ready to end the life of his son when the angel of Yahweh stopped him and said in verse twelve, "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." The Lord went on to reiterate His promises to Abraham and to his seed. God so abundantly poured out His blessings on Abraham because of the sacrifice he was so willing to make to submit to the authority of God.

Prayer

Prayer was an integral part of Abraham's ritual practices. It related directly to the sacrifices that he made so that the two are almost inseparable in his worship. If this is true, then it is likely that each time he built an altar and made a sacrifice, that he also addressed God in prayer. Pfeiffer attested to this by saying that the prayer and sacrifice combination was not a formalized rite, but a free and spontaneous communication between God and man.¹ Roland de Vaux said concerning sacrifice, "It is a prayer which is acted, a symbolic action which expresses both the interior feelings of the person offering it, and God's

¹Charles F. Pfeiffer, The Patriarchal Age (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), p. 89.

response to this prayer."¹ The sacrifice was a prayer which acted and expressed the inner feelings of Abraham as he acknowledged God's lordship and expressed his dependence upon God. Once again, the ritual of Abraham addressing God in prayer and communing with Him as he made his sacrifices was not unusual. Rainey has explained that in Mesopotamia the worship of pagan deities also involved the sacrifice and prayer combination. He said, "The role of sacrifice was inextricably bound up with prayer and supplication in the attempt of the individual to obtain health, prosperity, and well-being from his deity."² Of course the motive of the Mesopotamian worshippers was selfish, but the ritual itself was very similar. The theology of Abraham's prayer was vastly different, but the frequency and spirit were probably similar as noted in Ancient Near Eastern Texts.³

Much has been noted concerning prayer as an integral part of Abraham's worship. It only remains to support these statements from the narratives of his life. When prayer is mentioned here, it relates indirectly to Abraham's conversations with God and directly to his requests from God.

Instances such as when Abraham called upon the name of the Lord or when he built an altar will be overlooked at

¹de Vaux, Ancient Israel, p. 451.

²ZPEB, s.v. "Sacrifice and Offerings, by A.F. Rainey, p. 196.

³James B. Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 106,117.

this point so that attention may be given to those instances when Abraham directly addressed his Lord for some stated purpose. Genesis 15:2 finds Abraham responding to the revelation of God given in verse one. The Lord had told him not to fear because He was his shield and reward. But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" God promised him a son and Abraham believed God. He also questioned God about giving him some sign as proof he would possess the land. Abraham's prayers in Genesis 15 were questions addressed to his God. They were prayed in response to the Lord's revelation and were prayed with the expectation of an answer from Him. They concerned his own personal situation in relation to God's previous promises that had not as yet come to fruition.

Genesis 17:17-21 finds Abraham again addressing the Lord after a revelation from the Lord that Sarah would give birth. Abraham fell facedown and laughed with a sense of incredulity. The fact that he fell facedown would indicate that he did not respond with a mocking unbelief yet his faith was not complete. He apparently could not understand that God would truly do such a thing. God had revealed His plan, yet it would take time for Abraham to fully believe this great message. His worship was thus at first incomplete.

The second half of Genesis 18 records Abraham's most well known prayer in which he interceded for the city of

Sodom in which Lot lived. He bargained with God to save the city from destruction if even ten righteous people lived there. His prayer was once again in response to God's revelation to him.

Genesis 20:17 records that, "Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again." Abraham had sinned by lying to Abimelech about Sarah, but in verse seven, God rebuked Abimelech and told him to return Sarah to Abraham and Abraham would pray for him so he would live. Either God told the same thing to Abraham or else Abimelech relayed the message because Abraham did pray on his behalf and the prayer was answered.

The final prayer that should be mentioned is the prayer of Abraham's servant in Genesis 24. In verses 12-14 he prayed for success in finding a wife for Isaac. He made a very specific request of God and it was answered exactly. In verses 26-27 the servant prayed again after his request was answered exactly. As he worshipped the Lord he praised Him for His leading. This prayer like Abraham's prayers was a very important part of worship. They all manifested a dependence on God and a submission to Him who did all things well. It was the proper response to the revelation of God.

Posture

Posture was an important aspect of Abraham's ritual in worship. Chapter one described the primary posture of

worship as bowing down. "As folding or crossing the hands and arms denote the suppliant's mental concentration, and as the lifting up of outstretched hands expresses the fact that he is making a request, in the same way the physical act of bending indicates his readiness to bow to the will of the One whom he approaches in this manner."¹ In Abraham's day, bowing down was a common way of outwardly expressing worship. It was not common just to him, but even to the pagan peoples of his day.

It is vitally important that Abraham's ritual practices be understood as an outward expression of his worship. Their importance must not be lessened, for as the outward expression without the inner worship is sadly lacking, so also an inner attitude cannot be expressed without an outward act of worship.

¹NIDNTT, s.v. "προσκυνέω," by H. Schonweiss and C. Brown, Vol. 2, p. 877.

CHAPTER III

ATTITUDES OF ABRAHAM'S WORSHIP

When Abraham worshipped Yahweh, it was more than just a simple ritualistic form of worship in which he was involved. His worship was constituted by an inner response of submission to God. It is important to understand that submission to the revealed will of God was central for proper worship, but there were also several attendant, related attitudes that were present in Abraham's worship. They can all be readily noticed in the narratives of his life in Genesis.

Worship in Abraham's life was evidently both private and public as will be proved later. Whether private or public, the quality of the worship was to be found in the spirit rather than just the acts. The spirit or attitudes expressed with his worship were obedience, faith, devotion, praise and thanksgiving, and penitence. Along with these were two actions that could not be termed as ritualistic practices, but are best located with Abraham's attitudes. They are his witness to men and his pedagogic practices with his family and servants. All of these attitudes will now be viewed individually in the context of Abraham's life.

Obedience to God

The basic element of worship is submission to God and very similar to this is the attitude of obedience. One who would submit to the will of God must surely obey his Lord. This involves the hearing of the Word of God and then responding with an obedient attitude. Again and again Abraham listened to the Divine voice and responded obediently. Genesis 12:4 says, "So Abram left, as the Lord had told him" His submission was attended by strict obedience to God to leave his country, people, and father's household and go to a new land. Once again in chapter 13:17, the Lord told Abraham to, "Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." The result was obedience as he moved his tents to Hebron and built an altar there. In chapter 17, El Shaddai introduced circumcision to Abraham as a sign of the special relationship He had instituted with him. Verse eleven says, "you are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you." The command was very clear and so God went up from Abraham when He finished speaking. Then verse twenty-three says, "On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every man in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him." It was a common practice of Abraham to obey immediately when God spoke to him and by this he demonstrated that his worship was very real.

Genesis 22 provides the best example of Abraham's obedience as it attended his worship. His worship had been growing throughout his life since God called him from Ur. Then God tested Abraham and told him to take his son, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering. Verse three says, "Early the next morning Abraham got up" He took Isaac as soon as it was possible to travel and journeyed for three days to Moriah and carried out everything exactly as God told him to do. Only when the angel of the Lord called out to him did he stop the knife from plunging into his own son. This point of Abraham's life marked the apex of his worship. Yahweh was truly his Lord and he so wholeheartedly submitted to His revelation that nothing could stop him from complete obedience. Of course all of this was possible only because of the working of God in his life in a sovereign and personal way.

It is interesting to note that Abraham did disobey God on occasion. In Genesis chapter 12 and also in chapter 20 he sinned against God by telling Pharoah and Abimelech, respectively, that Sarah was his sister. The first failure forced Abraham back to obedience when he returned to the land of Canaan and went back to the place between Bethel and Ai where he had built an altar. This indicates that he was again ready to submit to God instead of relying upon his own devices. When he lied to Abimelech in chapter twenty, the only indication that his obedience was restored was when he

prayed to God for Abimelech as God had instructed. Failure did not negate the possibility of future worship. It only had the effect of temporarily halting worship until Abraham once again obediently responded in submission to his God who so graciously continued to work in his life.

Faith

A man who submits to God is a man who has an absolute faith in Him. From the very beginning it is assumed that at least part of the reason why Abel's sacrifice was accepted while Cain's was not was because of the faith in which it was offered. "The first altar reared upon the soil of Canaan was the answer of Abraham's faith to the promise he had just received."¹ Through the years Abraham continued to build altars which demonstrated that despite delayed promises, his faith continued to develop. He was to learn through his extended period of waiting "that one should not fasten faith on them (the promises) but on the Maker."²

Genesis 22 is again the supreme example of Abraham having placed his faith completely in God. He undoubtedly acted from the impulse of submission to the Divine commandment and was, as a result, commended for his faith and obedience. According to Speiser, "The object of the ordeal, then, was to discover how firm was the patriarch's faith in

¹Thomas Whitelaw, The Patriarchal Times (London: James Nisbet and Company, 1887), p. 259.

²Stigers, A Commentary on Genesis, p. 146.

the ultimate divine purpose."¹ This is a significant statement because it includes the centrality of the divine purpose which had been previously revealed to Abraham. His faith was so strong by that point in his life that he could in complete faith submit to the will of God by sacrificing Isaac as a burnt offering. Hebrews 11:17-19 says, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice . . . Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." Abraham's faith did not rest in the promise so much as it rested in the One who made the promise. He was willing to submit to whatever God brought into his life, while having complete confidence that what He did was right and what He promised would surely come to fruition. The same thing can be seen in Genesis 24 where Abraham's servant trusted God to answer his request to show him a bride for Isaac. When he asked, he then waited in faith for God to answer. His response to God's answer was that of worship as he prostrated himself before the Lord who honored his faith.

Devotion

The worship of Abraham involved a devotion to God that was willing to give the best that he had for the glory of his God. He devoted his entire life and all that surrounded it to Yahweh who by His character demanded a devotion from those who would worship Him. Devotion is similar

¹Speiser, Genesis, p. 166.

to the attitudes of obedience and faith but is important to mention separately because of its emphasis upon the total giving of self to the God who is personally involved in the life of the worshipper. The life of Cain is an example of one who was evidently not devoted to God and thus his apparent act of submission was actually in vain.

The Hebrew word *חָנָה* carries with it the connotation that devotion is shown to the object of veneration.¹ Throughout the history of Israel, the community sought to keep her relationship with God fresh through a variety of worship forms that would bring to remembrance her dependence upon Him for her very existence.²

Abraham was devoted to his God and this can be recognized in various instances throughout his life. In Genesis 12 his devotion is first seen as he left his relatives and homeland and set out because of the call of God for a country which he did not know. This proves that from Yahweh's earliest recorded call to him, Abraham devoted himself more to his new God than he did to human kin. In Genesis 14, Abraham had just returned from delivering Lot and the other captives from the cities of the plain when the king of Sodom met him. In verse 21 the King of Sodom said, "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself." In verses 22-23 Abraham said, "I have raised my hand to the

¹Toyozo W. Nakarai, "Worship in the Old Testament," Encounter 34 (August 1973):286.

²Virgil M. Rogers, "Some Reflections on Worship in the Old Testament," Reformed Review 30 (Spring 1977):192.

Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread on the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.'" Abraham's devotion was totally directed to the Lord and he would not be accused of giving it to men. He gave up all that he could have been given by the king of Sodom to assert that his devotion was to God.

The most easily discernible act of devotion performed by Abraham came when he gave his son Isaac as a sacrifice in Genesis 22. He did not offer him out of custom, but because Isaac meant so much, it demonstrated his complete devotion to God. The object of the ordeal was to discover how firm the patriarch's faith was in the ultimate divine purpose. For Abraham, "It could only have been to express his supreme devotion to God, with no thought of gain, either immediate or future, but with a readiness to abandon in this sacrifice the very possibility of the realization of his hopes or the fulfillment of the promises he believed God had made to him."¹ It was one thing for Abraham to leave his homeland or to give up earthly possessions, but it was the most complete act of devotion for him to give up the very son that he had waited for so many years to be born. His devotion grew with his worship until it likewise reached an apex at that time of great testing.

¹Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 27.

Praise and Thanksgiving

Attendant with the worship of Abraham were also the attitudes of praise and thanksgiving. This can be seen in a human way in Genesis 23 when Abraham bowed before the people of the land in which he sought to bury Sarah. Ephron the Hittite offered him a field and a cave and verse 12 says that Abraham bowed before the people of the land. This involved a gesture of gratitude but as Greeven has said, there is always expressed in the act a recognition that the one thus honored is God's instrument.¹

This praise and thanksgiving quickly points to Abraham's worship of God and the praise and thanksgiving that attended it. Genesis 12:6-8 name the first two sites where Abraham built altars to Yahweh. At Bethel it says that he called on the name of the Lord there. Little is said about his worship at either of the two places, but he evidently was motivated by praise and thanksgiving to God for bringing him to the land of Canaan and making all the promises of verses two and three concerning his future. It is also likely that the construction of the altar in Genesis 13:18 was motivated very strongly by praise. Lot had just taken possession of the best part of the land toward the plain of Jordan. When he and Abraham parted company, Yahweh told Abraham to look around the land in every direction and walk throughout it, for it would be his and his

¹TDNT, s.v. "προσκυνέω," by Heinrich Greeven, p. 761.

offspring's and they would be as the dust of the earth. Abraham moved his tents to Hebron and built an altar there to Yahweh. It is apparent that he was so filled with praise that he worshipped his God there at Hebron. In all of these instances, Yahweh had been faithful to His promises and blessed Abraham. Abraham only praised God because God first acted in Abraham's life to accomplish His perfect purposes.

The most clear demonstration of praise attending worship is found in Genesis 24:26-27 when Abraham's servant had his request concerning a wife for Isaac answered and "then the man bowed down and worshipped the Lord, saying, 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master.'" True worship praises God for His grace and mighty acts on the behalf of the worshipper. Praise is not inherent within the worshipper.

Penitence

A look at worship and its attendant attitudes is never complete without a discussion of penitence. This is no less true in the life of Abraham where there are intimations of penitence in his worship. Penitence was not a necessary motivation for all worship, but it was a visible attitude in Abraham's life on occasion. Early in his habitation of Canaan, Abraham traveled to Egypt in a time of famine. The journey to Egypt did not claim the disfavor of God, but when Abraham lied about Sarah, claiming her only as his sister to protect his own life, then he sinned against

God. It was amazing that God blessed him materially anyway and graciously allowed him to be rebuked and sent out of Egypt by Pharoah. Genesis 13:3-4 says that as he returned to Canaan, he journeyed back to the altar between Bethel and Ai and worshipped God. He undoubtedly thanked the Lord for his deliverance but the context makes it clear that he returned to the Lord repentant for his sin. It was necessary that he do so at that crossroad of his life so that he would again truly submit to Yahweh to protect him and be God in his life. The gracious work of God's deliverance of Abraham from Egypt caused him to respond with the proper repentant attitude.

A man of God who repents of a sin in his life and truly submits to Yahweh is not automatically invulnerable to a similar attack again. In Genesis 20, Abraham and Sarah repeated their failure from many years before by lying to Abimelech, but this time Abraham's penitence is less clear. Verse seventeen says, "Then Abraham prayed to God" There seems to be some indication that if he addressed God effectively, then he must have in some way repented of this repeated sin. The text is unclear concerning his precise reaction though.

The only other significant sin recorded in the life of Abraham other than the two mentioned occurred in Genesis 16 when at Sarah's request he took her maidservant, Hagar, and caused her to conceive. According to God's standards of monogamy this was wrong, but there is no record of Abraham's reaction to this. Thirteen years passed between that time

and the commencement of chapter 17 and the reason as to why can only be conjectured. Was there truly a period of silence in which Abraham did not repent of this sin and thus could not fully worship God? Is that why there is this thirteen year gap?

Witness to Men

Worship is something that is very private in many ways and yet was meant to be public in its testimony to the world. When Abraham and Isaac journeyed to the land of Moriah, they traveled the last leg alone to worship God in a private setting. When Abraham first entered the land of Canaan it is apparent that he stopped to worship at places where the Canaanites had already established worship sites. This was demonstrated in chapter two of this thesis. When Abraham stopped at the great tree of Moreh at Shechem, Genesis 12:6 also says, "The Canaanites were then in the land" Moses apparently went out of his way in a few words to demonstrate that Abraham did not worship in secret. He went to a center of Canaanite worship and there built an altar to Yahweh. He purposed to express his gratitude to Yahweh for bringing him to this new land. This building of the altar was also a public testimony to God's mercy displayed in this appearance to Abraham. It must have been for the benefit of the Canaanites who worshipped their own gods there because God did not cause Abraham to worship in a private place, but instead, in a public place. Genesis 13:4 records the return of Abraham to the same altar after time

spent in Egypt. As has already been noticed he returned in penitence and gratitude, but, "At the same time this public act proclaimed the honor of Yahweh, the true and faithful, to whom alone Abram ascribed his safe return."¹ As Parrot has said, Abraham set up the altar in opposition to the Canaanite "lord" of the place.² It must be recognized that Abraham meant much more than just an opposition to the Canaanite gods. He publicly worshipped Yahweh as a witness to the people of the land of the one true God. It also appears that he was witnessing as part of his submission to God to what he had been told in Genesis 12:3b. Yahweh had said, ". . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." This was not an imperative given to Abraham, but it must have left him with a sense of responsibility to proclaim the uniqueness of Yahweh to the pagan Canaanites.

Pedagogic Practices

A final attitude and practice of Abraham that related to his worship was that of teaching others what true worship was. There are two excellent examples of this presented in the Abraham narratives. Abraham's consistency of worship is first greatly noticed in the life of his son, Isaac. Attention in Genesis 22 is turned to Abraham and his act of worship, but in verse five he said, "We will worship" Isaac also worshipped Yahweh upon the mountain by

¹Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, pp. 432-33.

²Parrot, Abraham and His Times, p. 71.

submitting to Him and permitting his father to bind and almost kill him as a sacrifice. He was also well acquainted with the items necessary for the ritual of a burnt offering. It is obvious that Abraham had taught his son well concerning the definition, ritual, and attendant attitudes of worship directed to Yahweh. Isaac totally worshipped God just as his father did. Abraham taught by words, but also by a lifestyle of worship before his son. Much of this is not recorded but may be assumed by Isaac's reactions in this pivotal point of life for both father and son.

The second prime example of Abraham's pedagogic practice concerning worship is located in Genesis 24. Abraham sent his servant to Aram Naharaim to his home country to find there a wife for his son, Isaac. The important thing of which to take notice was that the servant went, depending entirely upon the Lord to point out the right girl. When the Lord answered his prayer and Rebekah was found, verse 26 says, "Then the man bowed down and worshipped the Lord" The servant was away from his master, but he had come to know Yahweh and had assimilated worship as a part of his life. Where could he have learned better what true worship of Yahweh was than through the teaching of his master, Abraham? In verse 45 the servant said to Laban and Bethuel, "Before I finished praying in my heart, Rebekah came out" The servant submitted to Yahweh by offering prayer for the success of his mission for Abraham and by depending upon Him to answer as only He could.

For Abraham worship was meant to be shared with family and servants alike so that all may with singleness of heart turn in worship to Yahweh. The lives of Isaac and the servant testify that Abraham was an excellent teacher of worship because of the way in which Yahweh had graciously worked in his life.

The worship of Abraham was not stagnant in any way. It did not involve ritual alone, but instead was a very real submission that was evidenced in his life by many attendant attitudes. These attitudes did not compose worship in a sense, but the worship of Abraham could not have existed as recorded without these attitudes that all pointed to his great and unique God.

CHAPTER IV

THEOLOGY OF ABRAHAM'S WORSHIP

Abraham's worship was very similar to the worship of the Canaanites in that both contained many of the same rituals and even many of the same attitudes, but there was something very different about the theology of the two religious systems. This chapter will look briefly at the typical polytheism of the Canaanites and then will proceed to divulge the features of Abraham's worship that were unique in his day.

The Typical Polytheism of Canaan

When Abraham first entered the land of Canaan he did not find himself in a virgin territory. There were people already occupying the land and they already had established a worship system. According to Roland de Vaux there was no real unity of religion; each district, city, and sanctuary had its own favorite gods, rituals, and sacred legends.¹ This immediately leads to the conclusion that there were many gods throughout the land of Canaan, but it must be recognized that there were many shared features among the

¹Roland de Vaux, The Early History of Israel, trans. David Smith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 146.

various gods including the form of worship. Polytheism was the belief of the inhabitants of the land and it was marked by distinctive characteristics as noted by Hunt.

According to Canaanite polytheism, the gods were scarcely distinct from the elements and powers of nature. These elements were personalized and named. Hence Canaanite rites, as we know them, were cultic recitals and cultic actions based on the fertility expected from Canaanite nature.¹

Nature played a great role in their worship. Saving events unlike those of the Bible are not related to history but to nature and its ever recurring cycle. Because of the irregularity in nature, the best way to regularize it was through ritual integration with the divine forces that alone produced fertility.²

The deities throughout Canaanite society, though sometimes different, often had the same or equivalent names and basic characteristics. The worship of these gods was not only polytheistic, but also anthropomorphic. They were just like humans in all areas of life.³ Thus far it is evident that Canaanite worship was both polytheistic and anthropomorphic as well as nature-oriented.

With these things in mind, a quick glance at the hierarchy of Canaanite gods is in order. The religion of the Canaanites is best known because of Ugarit. According to Albright, Ugarit was possibly a Canaanite city, but most

¹Hunt, The World of the Patriarchs, p. 69.

²Ibid., p. 72.

³de Vaux, The Early History of Israel, p. 147.

certainly shared a common Canaanite culture and language. The religion is virtually identical to the religion of North-western Semites throughout Palestine and Syria.¹ Because of this, much of the subsequent material will be the record of many of the deities discovered to be worshipped in Ugarit and, apparently, in Palestine. It is important to remember that these numerous gods and goddesses are obvious personifications of natural powers and objects.

El, the chief god was believed to dwell in a cosmic paradise where the gods had to travel when they wished to consult him. He was the progenitor of the gods, "tacitly likened to a bull in the midst of a herd of cows and calves." He is described as a bloody, brutal tyrant whose acts terrified all of the gods. The tablets of Ugarit also describe in very frank and sensuous terms an act of seduction which he performed.² El seldom figured actively in the mythology and "was not thought to communicate with gods or men except through visits or visions, respectively."³ He was a god who was in a sense aloof from all others. Those who worshipped him could not truly know him in a personal sense. He was cruel and sensuous, the epitome of what men were like.

¹William Foxwell Albright, Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan (London: The Athlone Press, 1968), p. 101.

²William Foxwell Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), pp. 72-73.

³Albright, Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan, p. 105.

Even though El was the chief god of the pantheon, it was the younger gods who were actually operative in Canaanite life. Baal is the god mentioned most in Scripture. He was the male fertility god who beat back the forces that destroy fertility.¹ He was also known as the storm god and thus seemed to be tied very closely with nature. It was nature with which the people sought to gain favor so that the weather would be profitable for them and their crops. The life of Baal brings forth evidence that the gods both fought with one another and could even die. They also were supposedly great influences upon the lives of men. When Baal died, ". . . the king ceased to give judgment, women ceased to draw water from the spring, the well of the temple ceased to yield water, and the sound of work ceased in the workshop."² Baal was far more involved in the affairs of men than El, but must have been viewed as more of a glorified, powerful, and sensuous man than a god. Of course, it is obvious that the Canaanites had a low view of what a god was. Their gods were more like glorified men with sensuous natures, needing men as much as men needed them. They did not know the true God and chose by their own knowledge of nature and man to create their own gods.

In a religion concerned greatly with fertility it would only be natural to worship female deities whose basic

¹Hunt, The World of the Patriarchs, p. 71.

²Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, p. 85.

function was sex. Asherah, Astarte, and Anath were the three major goddesses involved not only with sex, but also with war. Their sexual lives were both maternal and sensuous. Images of the goddesses portrayed their sex appeal and fecundity.¹ Asherah was the consort of El and was often pictured nude. Anath, the virgin sister of Baal, is an excellent illustration of the sensuous and violent lives of the gods. Her own brother, Baal, in an epic myth raped her "77--even 88 times." She was also known as an extremely cruel goddess who devoured Baal's body and drank his blood and rejoiced in her slaughterings of men.²

A few of the other gods mentioned in material pertaining to Canaanite worship are Dagan, the grain god; Reshef, the god of war and the underworld; Horon, the lord of the underworld; Tirosh, the god of new wine;³ and Mot, the god of death. All of the gods seemed to have been basically selfish. They became involved in the affairs of men basically for their own interests. They were willing to fight and kill one another to achieve their own personal goals.

The worship practices of the Canaanites were very violent and sensual as can be expected. Devotees brought wine, oil, first fruits, and firstlings of the flock to the altars on the high places. There near the altar often stood

¹Ibid., pp. 75-76.

²Albright, Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan, pp. 112-14.

³Millard, "The Canaanites," pp. 45-46.

a massebah representing the male deity in the fertility cult and an asherah representing the female element. Chambers were maintained for sacred prostitution by the kedeshim (male sacred prostitutes) and the kedeshoth (female sacred harlots).¹ Sacred prostitution was apparently a major part of the cultic ritual since the fertility of nature was so important to the Canaanites. With relation to the violence that was a part of the religious system, there is no mention of child sacrifice in the Ras Shamra texts, but it is likely that it was practiced in Canaanite worship.² Biblical allusions seem to point to this fact. II Kings 3:27 says that the King of Moab sacrificed his firstborn during a battle against Israel. II Kings 16:3 and 21:6 also tell of the sacrifice of children in Israel like that which was practiced by the nations they had driven out. These nations were the Canaanite nations.

There are many times in Genesis where the name El is used for the name of God. Cross believed that in patriarchal times there was polytheism and there were many El's. He said a special feature of their religion found, "Tutelary deity or deities entered into an intimate relationship with a social group, established its justice, led its battles, guarded its destiny."³ Cross found a personal god or gods in the

¹Pfeiffer, The Patriarchal Age, p. 63.

²Ringgren, Religions of the Ancient Near East, p. 162.

³Frank Moore Cross, Jr., "Yahweh and the Gods of the Patriarchs," HTR 55 (October 1962):259.

Abraham narratives but he also found polytheism and many El's. Robert Pfeiffer degenerated even further in his view of the El's. He said, Such were the divine beings worshipped by the ancestors of Israel and Judah: nameless and shadowy spirits, friendly to man, who resided in the trackless forest, on the top of hills, in the bubbling springs, in the rushing brook, in the quietly flowing river, in caves and rocks, in winds and storms, in life-giving rains."¹

This type of view equates the religion and worship of Abraham with the Canaanites of his day. It also develops from a low regard of the authority of Scripture and the differences in Abraham's religion as compared to Canaanite religion. Scripture cites no such religion practiced by Abraham. His worship was not animistic or in any way nature-centered. Van Seters accurately stated that El and the El epithets are alternate names for Yahweh in Genesis. He found no identification of these El epithets with some pre-existing deity of a Canaanite cult.² It is imperative at this point to recognize that there truly is only one El in the Abraham narratives and he is equated with Yahweh. Even such scholars as Roland de Vaux missed this when he acknowledged that the patriarchs brought the cult of their own god (the god of the father) to Canaan with them and there continued to worship him as well as adopt the gods of the

¹Robert H. Pfeiffer, Religion in the Old Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 25.

²John Van Seters, "The Religion of the Patriarchs in Genesis," Biblica 61:2 (1980):226.

Canaanites.¹

All of the liberal approaches to the religion and worship of Abraham fall far short of the assertions of Scripture. Before the theology of Abraham's worship is discussed, the reader should recognize that his worship cannot be categorized with that of the Canaanites. As will be discovered below, the major difference was the theology involved. The whole core of the worship system was radically different. Sensual, violent gods were nowhere to be found; polytheistic or even monolatristic worship was nonexistent; self-seeking, anthropomorphic deities were actually nonexistent. Abraham's worship features shared some similarities in form with some of the practices of the Canaanites, but his theological view transcended anything the ancient Near East produced.

The Unique Monotheism of Abraham

In a world that practiced polytheism widely, Abraham was a strange exception. He did not even stop at the halfway point of being a monolatrist as many liberal scholars assert. He was purely a monotheist who worshipped the one true God, Yahweh. Yahweh was not a god like the gods of the Canaanites and was not worshipped by them in any fashion.

Monotheism was not a new concept of worship with Abraham. The belief in one God can be traced back to Adam in the Garden of Eden and ". . . idolatry resulted from the

¹de Vaux, The Early History of Israel, pp. 272,274.

corruption of the faith of mankind."¹ There is evidence in the lives of men such as Enoch and Noah that there were some men who truly walked with God and thus could be considered monotheists. Abraham was a link in the chain of monotheists stretching back to the beginning.

Some have charged Abraham with polytheism or monolatry, but the pages of Genesis do not appear to point to this charge. Rowley said that it was very improbable that he worshipped the gods of Haran and added the local gods of Canaan to his worship patterns.² Genesis 12:1-3 records the words of Yahweh to Abraham when he was at Haran. It is evident that the gods he worshipped at Haran were left there and divorced from the life of Abraham for there is no mention throughout the rest of his life of any false gods from Haran that he still worshipped. Joshua 24:2b-3 says, "Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants." The text clearly asserts that Abraham was from a setting of a worship of false gods and that Yahweh took him out of that land of idolatry. It can be said with authority that Abraham left the gods of Haran completely and

¹M. Haran, "The Religion of the Patriarchs: Beliefs and Practices," The World History of the Jewish People, vol. 2: Patriarchs, ed. Benjamin Mazar (Israel: Jewish History Publications, 1962; reprint ed., N.p.: Rutgers University Press, 1970), p. 219.

²Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 11.

turned to Yahweh who sovereignly brought him out of idolatry.

The question arises as to whether Abraham adopted the gods of Canaan as well as commencing the worship of Yahweh. It has already been established that he stopped often at the sites where the Canaanites worshipped. Even a cursory glance at the text of Genesis 12:7-8 pointedly affirms that in both places Abraham built an altar to Yahweh. Abraham did not worship the local deity at Shechem, at Bethel, or at Mamre. As Rowley has pointed out concerning the patriarchs, they never invoked Baal who was worshipped in a widespread manner in Canaan, nor are there any goddesses mentioned in their worship like there were in the Ras Shamra pantheon or any of the other Canaanite religious systems.¹ Abraham did not continue to worship the gods of his father, Terah, nor did he consort to adopting new gods from his new homeland. The reason for this is apparent. Yahweh had become Abraham's God and Abraham no longer needed to or could continue to worship anyone or anything but Him. Monotheism is easily apparent throughout the Abraham narratives.

The Bible assumes the monotheism of the patriarchs throughout their lives and according to the custom of the nations of the ancient Near East this was remarkable. Some have attempted to deny this. Hunt has related that some have said that the Egyptian pharaoh, Ikhnaton, influenced the monotheism of the Israelites because he worshipped the

¹Ibid., p. 13.

god Aton. This can only be a wild attempt to deny the uniqueness of the monotheistic worship of Yahweh for four main reasons, according to Hunt. The first reason that monotheism could not have come from Ikhнатon is realized by noting that even the Egyptians did not profess to have derived any monotheism from him. A second great problem is seen in that the god Aton was not a personal god like the God of the Israelites. The date of Ikhнатon was also too late for the time of the Israelites and thus far too late for the time of Abraham. The final difference is found in that the monotheism of Ikhнатon was not ethical like that of Israel.¹ Despite this account of a type of Egyptian monotheism, the monotheism of Abraham was very different. Haran has said, "Monotheistic faith was linked in Israel to the specific divine name--YHWH--other names also but YHWH gives the message of oneness."² There were other names of God which will be treated briefly later, but the name, Yahweh, seems to be the one that points most strongly to Abraham's monotheistic faith.

The uniqueness of Abraham's monotheism can be perceived in various ways. Rowley has written of the oaks or trees in the Abraham narratives and said, "These objects mark sacred spots and are nowhere venerated for themselves, and the fact that the deity invariably takes human form

¹Hunt, The World of the Patriarchs, p. 69.

²Haran, "The Religion of the Patriarchs: Beliefs and Practices," p. 221.

would seem to carry the religion of the patriarchs far from animism or polydemonism."¹ Parts of this statement may be strongly questioned, but the basic element of truth is discovered in the fact that Yahweh did reveal Himself to Abraham in unusual ways, sometimes in human form, but always in a different manner than the gods of the Canaanites. From the text of Genesis it would be a difficult task to accuse Abraham of any polytheism.

Some attempt to make Abraham a polytheist because of the various names he used for Yahweh. They assert that all of the names refer to various local deities. Once again, looking at the text will dispel such a view. Genesis 14:22 uses the name אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה meaning God Most High but it uses it with יְהוָה meaning Yahweh and clearly is referring to the same God. In Genesis 17:1 it says there that יְהוָה appeared to Abraham and introduced Himself as אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה or God Almighty. It is ludicrous to say that a different name necessarily denotes a different god. Abraham worshipped Yahweh alone. Different names were used to describe different aspects of His character.

The Unique Personal Nature of Yahweh

Monotheism was uncommon in Abraham's day, but probably the most unique feature of the religion was the personal nature of Yahweh. This is where the biblical accent falls more strongly. As Hummel has said, "One may even

¹Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel, p. 16.

argue that the accent better expresses the heart of Biblical uniqueness than mere 'monotheism' (of which there are other forms, ancient as well as modern)."¹ The Canaanite religion depended on a cyclical return of natural phenomena while the Israelites' was based on the personal interventions of their God in a linear, progressive movement of history, a god who had chosen them, saved them, and led them to the land of Canaan.² The idea of a personal God and a personal relationship to Him was foreign to the people of Canaan. Parrot has cited an example of the religion of the Sumerians as being a religion involving personal relationships. He said, "The basic aspect of the religion of the time was indeed the desire of the worshipper to enter into personal relationship with his god." This is seen in cylinder seals picturing a superior deity, a mediatory deity, and the worshipper.³ The problem with the desire of the Sumerians was that the personal relationship could not be attained for their gods were not real. It is also true that if the gods they worshipped were real they were not of high character like Yahweh, so actually only worship directed toward Yahweh could be performed on the basis of a personal relationship.

The personal nature of Yahweh was very significant and evident as Abraham worshipped Him. Myers has made a

¹Horace D. Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 71.

²de Vaux, The Early History of Israel, p. 152.

³Parrot, Abraham and His Times, pp. 25-26.

summary type of statement to illustrate this point. He said, "The qualities of Abraham's God, as tradition has them, are personal presence and guidance, a God who makes and keeps promises, who 'covenants' with him and communicates with him directly; and who acts justly, not in a forensic sense but in a practical way."¹ It is evident that the cultic rituals of Abraham's worship were very important as expressions of his worship but more important than these was the fact that his worship is portrayed as a personal encounter with God. It was not a one time thing, for he had encounters with Yahweh many times throughout his life after he was called out of idolatry. Abraham had a unique relationship with Yahweh for Yahweh initiated a unique relationship with Abraham. There was a very real intimacy involved between the two. The quality of life experienced by the patriarch demonstrates much more than an animistic worship would involve. Abraham's worship of God was much more than mere ceremonies; it was wrapped up in a relationship with his God.

The whole key to the relationship between Abraham and Yahweh was a one-sided affair. It was monergistic in the sense that it all depended on Yahweh. Abraham did not suddenly decide to worship Yahweh. It was Yahweh who first sovereignly called Abraham and graciously established a personal relationship with him. There was nothing that Yahweh

¹Myers, "The Way of the Fathers," p. 121.

needed from Abraham. The gods of the Canaanites and their worshippers both somehow needed one another. Men needed their gods to show favor to them, especially in nature, whereas the gods needed the sacrifices of men to meet their needs. Yahweh needed nothing from Abraham but He still established a personal relationship with Abraham which was of great benefit to Abraham. It was the sovereign grace of God that selected Abraham as the one through whom He would make for Himself a special nation. Yahweh personally came to Abraham and brought him into a relationship with Himself and tremendously blessed him throughout his life. The blessings bestowed upon Abraham in God's covenant with him were not given because of Abraham's good works, but because of the grace of God. From there on, Yahweh remained personally involved in Abraham's life.

Many encounters of Yahweh and Abraham are recorded in Scripture and it can be concluded that these were just examples of the type of relationship that was initiated by Yahweh. Abraham's religion and worship were totally unique in respect to the nature of his God. The personal nature of Yahweh and His personal relationship with Abraham is evidenced in several ways in the Genesis accounts.

Evidenced by Abraham's Experience

Often experience is not the best evidence of anything, but a great deal can be learned of the personal nature of Yahweh by means of the experiences in which He was involved with Abraham. What is recorded in Genesis is part

of the inspired Word of God and thus is profitable. The major areas of the names of God, the personal revelations of God, and the covenant relationship will be considered separately from the experiences cited below.

The very first experience Abraham had with Yahweh came when he was called out of his country to go to Canaan. That it was a personal revelation from Yahweh is evident by the fact that Abraham had faith to relocate his entire life. The clear instances of anthropomorphisms in the Abraham narratives also reveal the personal nature of God to Abraham. In Genesis 18 alone various personal acts by God are seen. Verse eight shows Him eating with the two angels at the tent of Abraham. In verse twenty-one He was speaking of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah and said, ". . . I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me." Verse thirty-three pictures Him ending His conversation with Abraham. In these three instances God is eating at Abraham's tent, discussing His plans with Him, and ending a conversation and leaving like this type of personal relationship was a common thing. In the same chapter, "Abraham was intimate enough with Yahweh to bargain with Him and influence His policies . . . Abraham's reverence does not prevent him from dealing with God as a personal friend."¹ It is also quite interesting to see that in all

¹Cyrus H. Gordon, Introduction to Old Testament Times (Ventnor, NJ: Ventnor Publishers, Inc., 1953), p. 107.

of these encounters, the relationship pictured was one-sided. Yahweh needed nothing from Abraham and received nothing that would help Him while Abraham continually received the gracious blessings and benefits that proceeded from a relationship that depended solely on God.

Myers has written a list of several other evidences that picture the uniqueness of Abraham's God. Some of these will be listed below. He pointed out first that his God was not confined to a temple or a specific location. This is evident in that Yahweh first spoke to Abraham outside of the land of Canaan. After that initial call there were many personal contacts between the two at many places to which Abraham traveled. Along with this Myers said that God was present wherever Abraham called upon Him. This is clearly evidenced by the various altars built throughout the land of Canaan. It is also extremely clear from all of this that Yahweh was God of the individual and thus could be referred to as Abraham's God. Finally, Myers stressed the qualities of Yahweh's personal presence and guidance throughout the life of Abraham.¹ It was remarkable that Abraham's God went with him and spoke to him wherever he went. Yahweh was not the god of a place who cared about any selfish, sensual whims. He was the God who became very involved in the life of Abraham because of His own sovereign and gracious plans and purpose. Because of this Abraham's life was

¹Myers, "The Way of the Fathers," p. 130.

greatly affected and changed so that he might have a real meaning and purpose in his worship. He knew his God personally.

Evidenced by the Names of Yahweh

Yahweh revealed Himself to Abraham in various ways and by various names. These different names in no way point to the existence of other gods, but instead indicate that Yahweh chose to reveal His various characteristics by His names. As Paul Heinisch has said, "These names did not refer to various local gods who later coalesced into one, but were appellations for the one and only God."¹ These various names demonstrate something of the personal nature of Yahweh in His relationship to Abraham. They will not be dealt with in any depth, but will only be observed briefly as to their meaning and their relationship in context to Yahweh's personal dealings with Abraham. The two most used names are Yahweh and El while other names used in combination with these names are used less frequently.

The main name used is the name Yahweh and, even though the etymology is uncertain, it is recognized as the proper and personal name by which Abraham knew his God. The English translation of יהוה, "the Lord," does not really retain the personal element involved. In Genesis 12:8 when Abraham built the altar between Bethel and Ai, it says ויקרא בשם יהוה. This is best translated, "he called on the

¹Paul Heinisch, History of the Old Testament (N.p.: The Liturgical Press, 1952), p. 69.

name, Yahweh," rather than "the name of Yahweh." This places more emphasis upon the personal name.¹ The name El or Elohim is found many times throughout the Genesis account of Abraham's life. El is never used by itself; it is always used with other names. The Canaanites worshipped a god by the name of El, but the El whom Abraham worshipped was greatly different than the false god who was head of the Canaanite pantheon. This name was not a name with especially great meaning by itself, but it did solidly point to the deity of Yahweh.

The attributes of Abraham's El often constituted names that would be closely tied with the name El. Different names were utilized for Yahweh and those varied according to the attributes emphasized. As can be seen by these names in their contexts, ". . . the El of the patriarchs outclassed the Canaanite god through his qualities of eternity, transcendence, power, and personal relation which he alone possessed."² The first combination with the name El is Elyon. לֵּלֵּךְ לֵּלֵּךְ is best translated "God Most High." This name is found four times in Genesis 14:18-22 and identifies Abraham's God as being supreme. This name reflects the transcendence of God, but when viewed in context, it explains that the transcendent God is also the God whom Abraham worshipped. It was this Most High God who delivered Lot's captors into Abraham's hand and it was the same

¹Speiser, Genesis, p. 37.

²Parrot, Abraham and His Times, p. 116.

God to whom Abraham made an oath that he would take nothing belonging to the wicked king of Sodom. The transcendent God was also the God who was personally involved in the affairs of men. He personally intervened in Lot's time of need to benefit Abraham and Lot.

The second compound name of God to be examined is found in Genesis 16:13. אל ראי means "God who sees me" and voices the words of Hagar when she gave praise to Yahweh for speaking to her and promising her a son after Sarah had caused her to flee. Yahweh was gracious to her and she came to a realization of His care for her and her yet unborn son, Ishmael. It took a personal God to become involved in the life of a poor, pregnant servant girl. Once again, this action was not to meet some need of God, but to meet the need of one who could have her need met in no other way.

The name El Shaddai greeted Abraham in Genesis 17 as God had some extremely important things to relate to Abraham. The earliest interpretation of "Almighty" goes back to an early rabbinic etymology.¹ This name speaks of the strength or the power of God particularly over against man's frailty. Abraham was in an extremely difficult position in chapter seventeen. He had to face up to the impossibility of Ishmael as his heir and turn his face to the will of God. It had been twenty-four years since God first promised him a son, but now, "Abraham is to acknowledge that God can give him seed for it is El Shaddai in his creative

¹Speiser, Genesis, p. 124.

power who makes it possible."¹ It is also El Shaddai who is linked with God's action in initiating and maintaining the covenant between Himself and the patriarch. The God who personally promised a son for Abraham by His own power and the God who could make a special relationship with Abraham that would be everlasting was more than just a personal friend. He was the Almighty God who was personally involved in all aspects of the life of His servant.

El Olam is the last El name found in the Abraham narratives. Genesis 21:33 records the usage of this name as Abraham called on the name Yahweh at Beersheba. He had made a treaty there with Abimelech and planted a tamarisk tree as a long-living memorial to Yahweh as the everlasting God or God Eternal. Abraham could have complete confidence that his God who had been so central in his life would never cease to be in control of the affairs of his life and the lives of his descendants. Being a sovereign, eternal God, He could become involved in the life of Abraham and accomplish His will while always doing what was best for Abraham. His personal God had no chance of dying like Baal, the Canaanite god did.

One final name of Abraham's God that is related to Yahweh is יהוה יראֵה. When Yahweh stopped him from killing his son, Isaac, he named the place Yahweh will provide. At that time of supreme testing he saw that Yahweh truly would provide every need and that He was personally involved in

¹Stigers, A Commentary on Genesis, p. 163.

every aspect of Abraham's life. He kept His promise of a seed to Abraham and also manifested compassion by sparing the life of Isaac. Yahweh did not need Isaac or the special people that would come through him, but because of His sovereign grace He became personally involved in the life of Abraham.

The names of God contextually relate some of the characteristics of Yahweh and each can demonstrate His personal nature. Every time one of the names is utilized in Genesis it reflects a personal involvement of Yahweh in the life of Abraham or one of the members of his household.

Evidenced by Personal Revelations

Yahweh was a personal God who revealed Himself on various occasions throughout the life of Abraham. Nine of these occasions are recorded in Genesis 12-22 and because they came at various places, they marked ". . . a departure from worship of localized deities of Mesopotamia and Canaan who were mostly confined to temples."¹ Because God appeared to Abraham in various places, He was not primarily the God of a place, but rather the God of Abraham. The God who would reveal Himself to man was truly a personal God who was totally involved in the life of Abraham.

From the very beginning in Genesis, man is first approached by God. God called Abraham and gave to him those

¹Myers, "The Way of the Fathers," p. 125.

things which were unearned, totally of grace.¹ In Genesis 12-22 the nine revelations of Yahweh illustrated well that God was a personal God.

The first revelation of God is found in Genesis 12:1-3 and records His command to Abraham to leave his country, people, and household. He also gave him many promises of personal and future blessings. The result on the part of Abraham was submission to God's will. The personal nature of God can be easily recognized as He reached down and took interest in one who cared nothing about Him, yet it was this one who received all the benefits of the relationship. He took him out of a heathen setting and gave him a land of his own while maintaining His personal relationship with Abraham. The second revelation of Yahweh is also recorded in chapter twelve. In verse seven Yahweh said, "To your offspring I will give this land." Another promise had been made. Yahweh had definitely taken a personal interest in Abraham and his descendants and as a result Abraham built two altars to Yahweh as he passed through Canaan. This revelation was definitely marked by an appearance of God as well as the promise. The verb אָרָא is used to relate the fact of His appearance and manifest the fact that he was not some inanimate or selfish being.

The third revelation of Yahweh to Abraham was made in Genesis 13:14-17. There Lot and Abraham had just parted

¹John J. Davis, Paradise to Prison (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1975), p. 27.

ways. Lot had taken the well-watered pastures of the plain while Abraham remained in the hill country. Yahweh came to Abraham after Lot had departed as if to say, "My special interest and relationship is still bound up in you, Abraham. It is not because of your merits, but because of my sovereign grace that you have been so blessed." He reconfirmed His promises of the land and an innumerable number of descendants and commanded Abraham to continue walking throughout all of the land. Once again Abraham obeyed God and built an altar for the worship he performed. What god was there other than Yahweh who would personally speak to a man and make promises related to future events? The God of Abraham was personally involved in his life as the One who was sovereign over all.

The first three revelations mark the beginning of God's relationship with Abraham and also mark a gradually increasing amount of revelation which was being divulged. Chapter 15 cites the fourth and most lengthy revelation of God recorded up to that point. Yahweh introduced Himself as Abraham's personal shield and great reward and promised again an innumerable amount of offspring and possession of the land of Canaan. He then was manifested symbolically in the smoking fire pot and blazing torch as He made His covenant with Abraham. In a sense there had already been a special relationship instituted, but by chapter fifteen it is very clearly recognized as being so. God had initiated a relationship with Abraham that no man could have

instituted on his own.

After chapter fifteen, the sin of Sarah and Abraham in relation to Hagar is recorded. A lack of faith in the purposes and timing of God was discovered in the patriarch and following Genesis 16 there are thirteen years of silence where there is no record of the voice of God to Abraham. It is possible that God did speak to Abraham during that time, but the silence gives an indication, not of a broken covenant, but of a personal relationship that was hindered by the sin of Abraham. In Genesis 17 when Abraham was ninety-nine years old, Yahweh again appeared to him as El Shaddai who was able to confirm His covenant with Abraham. Abraham's reaction in verse three of falling face down may be an indication of his renewed desire to once again hear the intimate voice of his personal God. This fifth revelation detailed that Sarah would give birth to Isaac and also that Yahweh was giving Abraham circumcision as the sign of the covenant. His immediate obedience in circumcising the males of his household indicates the personal faith he had in the One who was worthy of trust.

The sixth revelation of Yahweh is recorded in Genesis 18 when He appeared with two angels at Mamre. This must have been very soon after the revelation in chapter seventeen for Abraham was the same age in both. Yahweh promised that Sarah would have a son at the same time the next year. Sarah's reaction was poor but Abraham must have fully believed God by that point. As Abraham walked along with

Yahweh towards Sodom the two continued in conversation. This is one of the most beautiful pictures of the personal nature of God. He allowed Abraham to walk along and talk with Him and even bargain or intercede for the city of Sodom. Yahweh and Abraham talked and walked along together as personal friends would do.

Genesis 21 marks God's seventh revelation to Abraham and this time He aided Abraham in working out a very difficult problem that concerned Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael had mocked Isaac and Sarah desired that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. God knew that Abraham was under great stress so He told him to do what Sarah said and He would also take care of Ishmael. He was deeply concerned to meet the needs of His servant. This was contrary to the gods of Canaan who sought most of all to meet their own selfish needs.

Revelations eight and nine in Genesis 22 came three days apart. First Yahweh desired to test Abraham and told him to take Isaac to sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Abraham's immediate obedience manifested the close relationship that had already been established between him and his God. The final recorded revelation commenced when Abraham's hand was raised above his son, ready to plunge the knife into his body. Yahweh checked his intended action and again confirmed the promise of an innumerable seed.

All of these revelations given to this one man clearly express the personal nature of Yahweh and the great difference in Abraham's relation with his God and the

relationship of the Canaanites with their gods. Yahweh was the personal God who revealed Himself to His chosen servant and allowed him to walk and talk with Him. Only He would or could initiate a personal relationship with man. Abraham was sovereignly blessed to know the personal God.

CONCLUSION

The worship of God in the life of Abraham has been presented so as to prove that it was more than just a vague concept in his mind. It was a very concrete aspect of his life that was central in his relationship to his God. The worship of believers today should follow many of the characteristics of the worship of Abraham.

In chapter one it was concluded that worship can be basically defined as a submission to the will of God. When Yahweh spoke to Abraham, he submitted to His revealed will. As his life continued, his worship deepened so that by the time that he was commanded to take Isaac and sacrifice him, he was ready to submit willingly to the voice of God. The life of the believer today should be marked by this type of submission. The believer should willingly submit to the authority of the Word of God as his directions for life.

Chapter two considered the ritual of Abraham's worship and demonstrated that the ritualistic practices in which he was involved were often similar to those of the surrounding pagan nations. There were some practices which he did not become involved in because they were ethically wrong, but most practices, including the central ritual of sacrifice, were a part of his worship. It is essential to

note that there were outward forms through which Abraham expressed his worship. It can be concluded from this that it is not enough to claim to be worshipping God fully when there is no outward expression. A believer may claim to worship God in his heart, but if there is not an outward expression of this worship, then it is not fully worship. Ritual without a heart attitude is definitely wrong, but so is a "heart attitude" without the ritual. A true heart attitude will necessarily spawn in outward expressions.

The attitudes involved with Abraham's worship are numerous. Several of these were described as to their relation to his worship of God. Worship was such a central part of his life that it was accompanied by many other attitudes. The person who is truly submitting to God has a strong faith that He always does right. He is ready to willingly obey the Word of the Lord even if he does not always understand why. Devotion and praise to God will necessarily follow, as will a penitence for sin. All of these things were present in the life of Abraham as recorded in Genesis 12-25. It was by God's grace that they were in Abraham's life. Worship is also an attitude and act that will be displayed before the world and before other believers. Abraham's worship at the various altars throughout the land gave testimony to the heathen Canaanites that his God was different. His worship was also didactic in relation to Isaac and to his servant who looked for a bride for Isaac. They both evidenced in their lives that they had

learned from Abraham what true worship was. The believer today should carry with him these attitudes that attended the worship of Abraham and realize that true worship of God is not an isolated thing.

Finally, the theology of Abraham's worship was what marked it as so vastly different from the worship of the Canaanites. He worshipped the God who created and reigned over all the earth. For him there was not but one God and this God, named Yahweh, was a very personal God. He could truly worship God because He had initiated their relationship. The experience of Abraham, the names of God, and all of the revelations which God made to Abraham clearly showed him that he was not worshipping a god of stone or a god who lived in sensual selfishness. Abraham truly worshipped the God who personally came down to sinful man to establish a special relationship with him.

Believers today should realize that it really is worth worshipping God. He is real and He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to make it possible for men to have a special relationship with Him. The believer can truly worship today because he worships the one God who is personally involved in his life.

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