Prostration to God and Humans—A Biblical Practice

Falling face-down on the ground, with hands and feet outstretched, was a common gesture of honor and respect in the Bible. Why is prostration only performed today on the High Holidays?

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Study for "David Prostrate, Whilst the Destroying Angel Sheathes the Sword,(colorized)" Benjamin West, ca. 1790-1800. Mead Art Museum at Amherst College

Haman’s motivation to kill the Jews is anger over Mordechai’s refusal to prostrate himself before him:

אסתר ג:ב וְכָל עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ כֹּרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לְהָמָן כִּי כֵן צִוָּה לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וּמָרְדֳּכַי לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה.

Esth 3:2 All the king’s courtiers in the palace gate knelt and prostrated themselves before Haman, for such was the king’s order concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or prostrate himself.[1]

The text does not explain why Mordechai refuses.[2] In fact, in the Bible, prostration before human beings is common. Abraham, for example, prostrates himself before the Hittites when he wants to buy a plot of land to bury Sarah:

בראשׁית כג:ז וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְעַם הָאָרֶץ לִבְנֵי חֵת.

Gen 23:7 Thereupon Abraham prostrated himself to the people of the land, the Hittites (also 23:12)

In addition:

**Jacob** prostrates himself before Esau seven times (Gen 33:3).

**Joseph’s brothers** prostrate themselves before him (Gen 42:6; 43:26, 28)

**Moses** prostrates himself before his father-in-law (Exod 18:7).

**David** prostrates himself before Jonathan (1 Sam 20:41).

**Nathan**, the prophet, and **Bathsheba**, David’s wife, prostrate themselves before King David (1 Kgs 1:23, 31).

The traditional explanation of Mordechai’s refusal is almost as old as the book itself. In the Greek Additions to the book of Esther, generally dated to the end of the 2nd century B.C.E.,[3] Mordechai himself addresses the problem head on:

“You know, Lord, that it was not because of insolence or arrogance or vanity that I... did not prostrate myself before the arrogant Haman; for I would have been quite willing to kiss the soles of his feet for Israel’s sake. But I did it in order that I might not put the glory of man above the glory of God; I will not worship anyone but You, O Lord.”[4]

Many commentators over the last 2100 years have used versions of this argument to explain Mordechai’s behavior.[5] However, rabbinic literature explicitly permits prostrating before another human being. For example, expanding on the verse that prohibits prostrating oneself before idols (Exod 20:5), the Talmud states:

בבלי סנהדרין סא: להם אי אתה משתחוה אבל אתה משתחוה לאדם כמותך.

b. Sanh. 61b Before them [idols] you may not prostrate yourself; but you may prostrate yourself before a person like yourself.

The *baraita* (a tannatic tradition not found in the Mishnah) then questions whether humans can bow down to someone who considers themselves divine, like Haman:

יכול אפילו נעבד כהמן ת"ל ולא תעבדם.

Is it then permissible [to prostrate yourself before] a person who is worshipped [as a deity], as Haman was worshipped? [No, and] that is why the verse continues, “You shall not worship them.”[6]

Yet the Talmud continues, saying that prostration might be permissible in a case, such as Haman’s, where there is a threat. Consequently, some concluded that Mordechai’s behavior was supererogatory (לפנים משורת הדין), i.e. not required by Jewish law but done in order to sanctify God’s name.[7]

Prostration before God

God-fearing Israelites prostrate themselves before the deity over a hundred times in the Bible.[8] For example, the elders of Israel prostrate themselves at Sinai:

שׁמות כד:א וְאֶל מֹשֶׁה אָמַר עֲלֵה אֶל יְ־הוָה אַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם מֵרָחֹק.

Exod 24:1 Then He said to Moses, “Come up to YHWH, with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel, and prostrate yourself from afar.

When bringing the first fruits, Israelites must prostrate before God:

‏דברים כו:י וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת רֵאשִׁית פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לִּי יְ־הוָה וְהִנַּחְתּוֹ לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Deut 26:10 “Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O YHWH, have given me.” You shall leave it before YHWH your God, and prostrate yourself before YHWH your God.

According to Professor Uri Ehrlich of Ben-Gurion University:

During the biblical period, prostration constituted the preeminent, most ritualized physical gesture in the sacrificial and prayer services…. During the Second Temple period as well we find widespread evidence for the continued practice of prostration in prayer and in the Temple.[9]

But after the destruction of the Second Temple, prostration ceased to be part of rabbinic Jewish worship except on rare occasions.[10]

Prostration Today

In the *Aleinu* prayer, recited three times a day at the end of the services, we declare:

וַאֲנַחְנוּ כּוֹרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים וּמוֹדִים לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא.

We go down on our knees, prostrate ourselves, and give thanks to the Sovereign, the Sovereign of all sovereigns, the Blessed Holy One.[11]

But the custom is only to bow, i.e. bend just the top part of the body. The custom to kneel and perform prostration holds only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when reciting the *Aleinu* prayer, and on Yom Kippur during the *Avodah* prayer, in a passage that commemorates and reenacts the prostration that was performed in the Temple on Yom Kippur. When and why did we stop routinely prostrating before God?

A Talmudic passage tells the story of Rabbi Abba b. Aybo, known simply as “Rav,” who was born in Babylonia, studied in the land of Israel, and then, in the beginning of the third century, returned to Babylonia where he became a leading rabbi:

בבלי מגילה כב: רב איקלע לבבל בתענית צבור... נפול כולי עלמא אאנפייהו ורב לא נפל על אפיה.

b. Meg 22b Rav came to Babylonia on a fast day... everyone prostrated themselves [at the prayer service], but Rav did not prostrate himself.

The Talmud questions Rav’s behavior:

בבלי מגילה כב: מ"ט רב לא נפיל על אפיה רצפה של אבנים היתה ותניא (ויקרא כו, א) ואבן משכית לא תתנו בארצכם להשתחות עליה עליה אי אתה משתחוה בארצכם אבל אתה משתחוה על אבנים של בית המקדש.

b. Meg 22b Why did Rav not prostrate himself? It was a stone floor, and we have learned that [the verse] “You shall not put an *even maskit* in your land to prostrate yourself on it” (Lev 26:1) [means that] you are not allowed to prostrate yourself on a stone floor[12] in your land [i.e. away from the Temple precinct], but you may [or perhaps must?] prostrate yourself on the stone floor in the Temple.

The Talmud offers a second explanation based on Rav’s social position:

בבלי מגילה כב: אין אדם חשוב רשאי ליפול על פניו אלא אם כן נענה כיהושע בן נון דכתיב (יהושע ז, י) ויאמר ה' אל יהושע קום לך [למה זה אתה נפל על פניך].

b. Meg 22b An important person may not prostrate himself [in public] unless he is certain that he will be answered [by God] as Joshua was answered, as it is written (Josh 7:10), “The Lord said to Joshua: ‘Arise! [Why do you lie prostrate?]’”

At most, these explanations explain the behavior of Rav in these specific circumstances. But they do not explain why prostration was removed from common practice.

Why Prostration is Rarely Practiced

Modern scholars have offered several different explanations for the suppression of the practice of prostration.

Differentiating Jews from Christians

According to the late Professor Louis Ginzberg of the Jewish Theological Seminary, since prostration, or at least going down on one’s knees, became such a central part of early Christian worship, Jews chose to differentiate themselves by refraining from such practices. He writes:

As a result of the adoption by the Christian Church of most of the Jewish Forms of Adoration, it came about that in Palestine, where the opposition between Synagogue and Church grew constantly stronger and more hostile, the old Forms of Adoration came to be looked upon with disfavor.[13]

Like Ginzberg, many scholars point out that opposition to prostration was stronger in the land of Israel than in Babylonia.[14] (In the Talmudic story quoted above [b. Meg 22b], it was when Rav returned from the land of Israel to Babylonia that he refused to take part in the prostration ceremony.)[15]

Avoiding Prostration before Images

Another explanation contends that after the destruction of the Temple, when synagogues began to be built with figurative mosaic floors, the rabbis did not want Jews to be prostrating themselves while looking at these images.[16] Such behavior could be seen as transgressing the words of the Decalogue:

שׁמות כ:ד לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וַאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַָּחַת וַאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ. כ:ה לֹא תִשְׁתַּחְוֶה לָהֶם....

Exod 20:4 You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. 20:5 You shall not prostrate yourself before them....

The late Professor Gerald Blidstein of Ben-Gurion University expressed doubts about both of these explanations, arguing that since prostration in prayer was an ancient Jewish practice, it would be unlikely to be discontinued just because early Christians were doing it. As for the argument about mosaic floors, Blidstein offers evidence that the rabbis restricted prostration before mosaic floors became common in synagogues.[17]

Prostration Only Allowed in the Temple

Blidstein proposes rather that “Prostration as a response to the presence of God was restricted to the now ruined Temple.”[18] He points out that the substitute of bowing when praying, advocated by the classical rabbis, was the inverse of the way prostration was practiced in the Temple. In the Temple, people prostrated themselves when they heard the name of God pronounced (m. Yoma 6:2); but after the Temple’s destruction, the same Rav who would not prostrate himself with the community taught:

בבלי ברכות יב. המתפלל כשהוא כורע כורע בברוך וכשהוא זוקף זוקף בשם.

b. Ber. 12a When people praying bend their knees, they should bend them when they say the word ברוך [“blessed”] and should straighten themselves when [or perhaps before] reciting God’s name.

This principle—that the synagogue’s rituals were purposely structured to be different from the Temple’s, may be part of the answer. But the rabbis’ attitude to Temple practices after the Temple was destroyed is complex. Some Temple practices, like animal sacrifices, were not transferred to the synagogue. But others, such as reciting the priestly benediction, were.

Influence of Greco-Roman Culture

Professor Uri Ehrlich approaches the question from a new direction, based on changing sociological conditions. He points out that in post-biblical times, prostration before a monarch was still common in the east, but not in the Greco-Roman world which was the cultural reference of the earliest rabbis in the land of Israel. Josephus, for example, describes how people prostrated themselves before the queen in Adiabne (in modern Iraq), and added for his Roman readers, “as is their custom.”[19] Ehrlich writes:

If during the biblical and early Second Temple periods, Palestinian society was under eastern cultural influence, in which prostration dominated the social and religious spheres, in the late Second Temple and rabbinic periods Palestinian Jewry was subject to Hellenistic-Roman influences.[20]

This could explain why the rabbis of the land of Israel felt awkward about prostration before God. Prostration before God only made sense in a culture where people also prostrated themselves before human authority figures.

According to English historian of ancient Rome J.P.V.D. Balsdon (1901–1977):

In ordinary social life… such physical abasement [as prostration] was not practiced by the Greeks themselves... This social practice... startled and shocked them.... The act, indeed, was for all Greeks... the typical indication of oriental servility. According to their mood, they regarded it as comic or as humiliating.[21]

Ehrlich proposes that when the rabbis of the land of Israel were creating a new style of prayer after the destruction of the Temple, prostration no longer had cultural meaning. Once this meaning was gone, then, as Blidstein wrote, opposition to prostration could be seen either “as a rejection of the public self-humiliation attendant on such penitential behaviour” or “as a discouragement of demonstrative pietism.”[22]

Some medieval Jewish sources say explicitly that the problem with prostration in prayer is that it is a form of inappropriately demonstrative piety. For example, Menahem Meiri, writing in 13th-/14th-century Provence, writes:

אין אדם חשוב רשאי להעמיד עצמו כל כך כחסיד לפני הצבור שיפול על פניו לפניהם.

An important person may not portray himself in front of the community as being so pious that he prostrates himself in front of them.[23]

Perhaps if Meiri had been living in a country where people regularly prostrated themselves before other human beings as a sign of deference or fealty, he would not have seen prostration before God as a demonstration of false piety.

Prostration Culturally Unnatural

Judaism never defined prostration as a gesture reserved only for God. The opposite is true. Judaism was created and thrived for around a millennium in a society where prostration was a standard way for a human being, Jew or non-Jew, to honor another human being. As such, this honor was naturally extended to God, too.

Once the Temple was destroyed and many of its practices discontinued, and prostration became culturally unnatural—seen as comic or humiliating or excessively pious—it made sense that prostration did not become part of the newly constituted post-Temple liturgy.[24]

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1. Biblical translations follow NJPS, with modifications.
2. Professor Jon Levenson of Harvard University has called the absence of an explanation in the story for Mordechai’s actions “a mysterious refusal whose cause can only be guessed,” while Professor Michael J. Fox of the University of Wisconsin calls it “the biggest puzzle” in the book. Fox adds that the author of the book seems to admire Mordechai’s behavior, and “must have in mind some reason for such persistent, dangerous, and apparently useless behavior.” Both Levenson and Fox are cited by Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 63.

Professor Jonathan Grossman of Bar-Ilan University ([מרדכי אינו כורע ואינו משתחווה](https://www.etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/ketuvim/megillat-esther/mordekhai-did-not-bow-nor-did-he-prostrate-himself)) notes that rabbinic literature (e.g., b. Meg. 12b–13a) contains criticism of Mordechai’s behavior. Grossman wonders whether the author of the book of Esther also sees Mordechai’s refusal in a negative light, but concludes that that is not the case. This mystery even led to some twentieth-century antisemitic readings of the book of Esther, such as the claim by Lewis Bayles Patton that Mordechai the Jew displays “wanton insolence” (= *chutzpah*) when he refuses to prostrate himself. See Lewis Bayles Patton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner, 1908), 96. See also my essay: [“Haman’s Antisemitism: What Did He Not Like About the Jews?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/hamans-antisemitism-what-did-he-not-like-about-the-jews) *TheTorah*(2017); and the discussion of this issue in Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 23–45.

1. The Additions comprise six passages, generally labelled A to F, that are found in Greek manuscripts of the book of Esther, but that are not present in the Hebrew text. Editor’s note: See Aaron Koller, [“A More Religious Megillah: The Jewish-Greek Version of Esther,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/a-more-religious-megillah-the-jewish-greek-version-of-esther) *TheTorah* (2014).
2. Addition C, verses 5–7. In some Christian Bibles, this appears as Esther 13:12–14.
3. One fine modern version of the argument is Rachel Friedman’s essay, [“Why Mordechai Refuses to ‘Kneel and Bow’ to Haman,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-mordechai-refuses-to-kneel-and-bow-to-haman) *TheTorah* (2021).
4. Accordingly, rabbinic writers generally explain the story as Mordechai’s refusal to prostrate himself before someone who: 1) considers himself a god (see Rashi, commentary to Esther 3:2: שעשה עצמו אלוה, perhaps a Hebrew paraphrase of the Aramaic of b. Meg. 19a: דעביד נפשיה עבודה זרה); or 2) wears some symbol connected to idolatry on his clothing (see, e.g., Targum Sheni on Esther 6:4). Some midrashim also explain Mordechai’s refusal as unrelated to religious principles, but as part of an old feud between Mordechai and Haman; see, e.g., Yalkut Shimoni, 1056. For a discussion of why Mordechai did not bow down, in a new edition of the book of Esther for children, see Shoshanna Lockshin and Efrayim Unterman, *The Devash Megillat Esther* (New York: Hadar, 2024), 29–31.
5. See Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 67, and the sources cited there, including, for example, Tosafot Shabbat 72b, s.v. *rava amar patur*.
6. Mayer Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East*(Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 96.
7. Uri Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach of Jewish Liturgy*, trans. Dena Ordan, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 105 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 38–39.
8. Maimonides writes that prostration is an ideal way of saying the *tahanun* prayer, although he provides the other more common model, too (MT *Tefillah*5:13–14). Maimonides’ son, Abraham, was an advocate of prostration. The Zohar, in a few passages, speaks positively about prostration. Today, Karaite Jews continue to prostrate themselves at prayer. See the discussion in Naphtali Wieder, *Islamic Influences on Jewish Worship:* *The Formation of Jewish Liturgy in the East and the West*[Heb.] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1998).
9. Editor’s note: For more on the *Aleinu* prayer, see Reuven Kimelman, [“Aleinu: God of All, or God of the Jews?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/aleinu-god-of-all-or-god-of-the-jews) *TheTorah*(2014).
10. Interpreting אבן משכית as a stone floor intended for worship. See Targum Onkelos to Leviticus 26:1: וְאֶבֶן סִגְדָּא.
11. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Adoration.”
12. See e.g. Ehrlich, *Non-Verbal Language of Prayer*, 44, and GeraldBlidstein, “Prostration and Mosaics in Talmudic Law,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies*2 (1974): 19–39, esp. pp. 35–37.
13. A text in the Palestinian Talmud (AZ 4:1) refers to prostration on fast days as a practice of Babylonian Jews. There, Rabbi Yohanan who lived in the land of Israel said: בבלייא תרין מילין סלקין מן גביכון. מפשוטיתא דתעניתא— “Babylonians, two customs come from you: prostration on a fast day....”
14. See R. Wischnitzer-Bernstein in *Jewish Art*, ed. Cecil Roth (New York, 1961), 209; cited by Blidstein, “Prostration and Mosaics in Talmudic Law,” 21.
15. Blidstein, “Prostration and Mosaics in Talmudic Law,” 21.
16. Blidstein, “Prostration and Mosaics in Talmudic Law,” 21.
17. Antiquities 20:28. See also Antiquities 20:56, regarding prostration before a monarch in Parthia (modern-day Iran). I am grateful to Professor Daniel R. Schwartz who directed me to these texts and who pointed out to me the article by Balsdon mentioned below.
18. Ehrlich, *Non-Verbal Language of Prayer*, 44.
19. J.P.V.D. Balsdon, “The ‘Divinity’ of Alexander,” *Historia: Zeitschrift fűr Alte Geschichte* 1 (1950): 375.
20. Blidstein, “Prostration and Mosaics in Talmudic Law,” 32.
21. Meiri, commentary to Taanit 14b.
22. In a combination of political zeal and religious fervor, some Jews who advocate praying today on the Temple Mount are also promoting the idea of prostration in prayers conducted there. See, for example, Tzahi Reuch, בגדרי ההשתחויה ואופיה, *Asif*7 (2021): 294–328.