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## The Holiness of God in the Old Testament

“Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” This command found in Leviticus is in many ways a summary of the religious experience of the Israelites. It speaks of an understanding of God, Yahweh as “holy”, and suggests the possibility of human relationships with God. Moreover, such relationships are explained as participations in the very holiness of God Himself.

Quite naturally then, holiness is a key, pivotal concept of the religion of the Old Testament. Indeed, holiness is as vast, wide, and deep as the mystery of Yahweh Himself. Gradually this Hebrew understanding of holiness deepened and developed as the Israelites listened, reflected, and responded to God’s call.

### **Conceptual clarification**

We begin with an etymological study of words used to describe holiness; the context of the usage may also provide clues to clarify meaning and other associated words and concepts will put the concept into fuller relief. Finally, contextual use of the word by certain groups such as priests and prophets will also shed some light on it. Certainly, holiness pervades the pages of the Old Testament. Indeed, it has often been stated that the religion of the Israelites of the Old Testament can be referred to simply as “Die Religion der Heiligkeit.”<sup>1</sup>

Our treatment begins then, with a study of the word “holy.” The word used to signify “holy” in the Old Testament is the root  $\text{qds}$ ; this appears in various forms in several different Semitic languages. Two theories have arisen about possible etymological origin the first claims that the root carries the meaning of “cut off” or “separate.” Allied to this idea is a similar root  $\text{nzr}$ , “to separate” or “to consecrate” (Num. 6: 1–22 considers this in some detail—“All the

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1. D. J. Haenel. *Die Religion der Heiligkeit*. Gutersich 1931.

days a Nazarite is separated, he is holy ?"). Basically, whatever is holy is cut-off, or separate, from all other common forms of life.

However, another theory assigns the meaning "to be bright" or "to shine" to the root. The source here is the Akkadian word "qadasu" which means "to shine." In other languages such as Arabic, several corresponding words give evidence of being Semitic loan words and are thus of lesser value for determining origins. For example, in the *Koran*, the Arabic root favours the idea of "pure" with the sense of the clean as being separated or removed from the unclean. Yet there seems to be evidence of Jewish influence even here; Phoenician referents tend to respect the separation concept, while the Ethiopic seems to be influenced by the concept of the Hebrew Bible. Although comparisons suggest a meaning similar to the Hebrew, there is still not enough evidence for a clear solution of origins. The second etymology, from the Akkadian, "qadasu", suggest "light" and conforms to several contexts where the holiness of God is associated with fire (Deut. 5 : 23-26; Is. 34 : 8-10; Amos 1 : 4, 7, 10, 14). On the other hand, the first, that of separation, applies to many more contexts and, so, is the preferred understanding for the root.<sup>2</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, this root takes several different forms more than seven hundred occurrences of the trilateral root (qds) may be found in the Bible. As a noun, (qds) carries the meaning of holiness, apartness, and sacredness as such it can be used for God, persons, places, or things. Its adjectival use similarly means sacred or holy, and, as a verb, it carries the emphasis of "to be set apart" or "to be consecrated." The root is also used to signify a proper place name, the general idea of a sacred place, a sanctuary, or a place of sanctuary, and therefore the idea of temple. Finally, it is sometimes used to indicate temple prostitutes, the connection being those set aside for cultic prostitution which the laws of Deuteronomy (e.g. Deut. 23 : 18) forbid to the Israelites.

In evolving as a distinctive group, the Israelites experienced various powers and forces of nature; they pondered these experiences, so mysterious in origin and meaning. In their reflection, they resembled other peoples of the ancient Near East recognizing force beyond their realm, beyond their understanding. This power

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2. H. Ringgred, *The Prophetical Conception of Holiness*. Upsala, 1948. p. 4.

or force seemed radically different from that of other experiences; although pervasive, it seemed so removed, so separated, from the sphere of everyday existence. Rudolf Otto aptly calls this Power the "mysterium tremendum."<sup>3</sup> For the Israelites, as for their neighbours, this experience was linked to an evolving concept of gods or a god. Yet, for the Israelites, God was the one phenomenon that was wholly "other", totally different from all mundane experience. God was separate, removed, cutoff from the common things of the Israelites world. Thus God, called "holy", qds "separate", "cutoff", was a dynamic force experienced in a way (qds) different from all other experiences. Nevertheless, this force extended to every single area of existence: it touched history, nature, individuals, indeed, everything and everyone. Upon deeper reflection, the character of otherness, the aspect of being totally different, separated, became the way of expressing not just an experience but, further, the *nature* of that experience. Holiness is the life of God; it characterizes God Himself. Therefore, the names Yahweh and the Holy One become synonymous (Ps. 71: 22; Is. 5: 24; Hab. 3: 3). As Muilenburg states, "Holiness was the distinctive signature of the divine."<sup>4</sup> But as a concept, holiness defied precise formulation and definition. Holiness referred to the divine itself, and the divine is ultimately unanalyzable. Thus, there was, above all, a sense of the numinous and the divine which eluded convenient enclosure.

Holiness, then, being of the nature of God, pointed to a dynamic power and even more; it seemed personal. The divine began to be understood as a power, an overwhelming and mysterious power and therefore the Israelites depicted a marked division between the "holy" and the "unholy." A natural reaction to this realization of power and otherness, was awe and fear which was used to teach each human the lesson of his own impotence, and consequent dependence on God. But this fear ought not be over emphasized in the Hebrew Bible, the revelation of God to individuals does not cause fear primarily. When Moses meets God in the burning bush, he is not fearful, but curious (Ex. 3: 2-3): "The messenger of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in the midst of a thornbush. He looked the bush was burning with fire but the bush was not consumed by it. Moses thought to

3. R. Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford, 1923. p. 12.

4. J. Muilenburg. "Holiness" in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. G. A. Buttrick, ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, Vol. II, p. 616.

himself, 'I must turn and look at this great sight, why the bush does not burn up.'" We must balance the idea of curiosity with the theophany on Mt. Sinai (ex. 19 : 1-25) where the drama of the moment is enhanced by the fear of the people.

God appears so totally other as to be utterly unapproachable by human beings yet, God does not remain isolated and separate. Rather, God takes the initiative and directs his power, his holiness, outside of Himself. God approaches man and reveals himself, his holiness, to man (Lev. 10: 3), manifesting His holiness and his wish to be recognized. The Israelites believed that God acts in history through theophanies as part of creation itself. God, then, acts by particular interventions in the human world, choosing a people and then protecting them in a special manner (Ez. 28 : 25-26) by His divine choice.

There is a tension in this basic understanding of holiness; a great abyss exists between God and each human being, but God chooses to bridge that gulf. Although radically unapproachable, God chooses to reveal Himself, so He must be held in awe and even fear (Is. 8 : 13). But this very power can also bring happiness and goodness; it is thus not an evil power, for it promises blessings. A warning is made to the people who approach this Holy one, Yahweh; they must be properly prepared. God is both merciful and terrible, beneficial and awesome; the holiness of God may bring life or death. We see then a certain ambivalence in Israel's reaction; fear and trembling coupled with attraction and allurements.

The Old Testament is filled with stories of God's favour to his people. The saving acts of the Holy One, Yahweh, became one of the foundations of Israel's religion. Yahweh manifested himself by delivering Israel from the slavery of Egypt and establishing a covenant with the Hebrews (Ex. 12, 19, and 20). This is the heart of the Israelite religious experience.

However, there is the other dimension of holiness—the terrible, the unapproachable "other". II Sam. 6 : 1-11 (and I Chron. 13 : 1-14) recount the story of Uzzah.<sup>5</sup> The context is David carrying the Ark

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5. The Hebrew of the Masoretic Text is unclear in II Samuel 6 at verse 7. I Chronicles 13 : 10, which is the parallel, is clear.

of God to Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> The mood is joyous; David and the people accompany the cart carrying the Ark in a festive mood with musical instruments and songs. For some reason, the oxen pulling the cart stumble and the Ark shifts, almost falling off. Uzzah, one of those driving the cart, puts out his hand and grabs the Ark, lest it fall to the ground. Apparently Uzzah was slain instantly by God for what he did. I Chron. 13 : 10 : "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah and he struck him because he put forth his hand upon the Ark and he died there before God."

One result is that David fears the Lord and, therefore, is afraid to move the Ark any further. So it remains at the house of Obededom in the vicinity. While the Ark is at the house, however, the family of Obededom is blessed by God. Then, because of this benevolence, David completes the task and the Ark enters his city, Jerusalem, again in the midst of festive joy.

Upon reading this, one naturally feels pity for Uzzah who was struck down. Yet it does seem that the story serves to present a lesson on holiness.<sup>7</sup> The lesson concerns "sacredness," the holiness of the Ark : to touch the Ark, which is special, "set apart," is to profane it. The holiness manifest in the Ark is the holiness of God which transcends all moral considerations. The story is actually closer to taboo conventions than to moral roots. The Israelites understood Yahweh to be like them in many ways, although like man there was a radical difference, a separation. God is absolutely separate, absolutely holy. Moral considerations do not come in at this stage. The absolute power of God's holiness results in Uzzah's downfall. His death was the inescapable consequence of close contact with the divine, with such overwhelming holiness or "apartness."<sup>8</sup>

Despite this separateness, nowhere else in antiquity is god deemed to be as close to his people as the God of the Old Testament (Is. 12 : 6 :

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6. X. Leon-Dufour, ed. Holy." *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. London : Chapman, 1982. page 30. In ancient Israel from the Exodus to the destruction of the Temple, the Ark is a visible symbol of God's presence among his people. It was a box approximately five feet long, three feet high and three feet wide. Inside were the tablets of the Commandments. The outside was covered with gold and an image of the heavenly Cherubim. It was also considered to be Yahweh's footstool or throne (cf. Deut. 10 : 1-5).
  7. T. Worden. "Be Holy as I am Holy." *The Way*. 3 (1963) p. 3.
  8. Worden. *ibid* p. 6.

“Cry out and give a shout, inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel”). Here is a god involved with a people and human history; a dialectical “holiness” in the sense of separateness and “glory” stressing immanence.<sup>9</sup>

Although resembling their Near Eastern neighbours, Israel’s self-understanding and realization of God’s uniqueness marked their religion as distinctive and different. As will be seen, even though Israel would call things, places, and even persons holy, these could never be fully divinized. Holiness moved in only a vertical direction for the Israelites. Israel did not make Yahweh holy as their Canaanite neighbours created holy gods, rather, Yahweh made Israel holy and called her to holiness. For Israel, Yahweh became *the one God* for all nations, not just the God of Israel. Many of Israel’s neighbours respected the deities of other peoples, but Israel could not, because of her understanding of Yahweh’s uniqueness. Yahweh can conquer everything else at will, often with just a word, but, ultimately, the acts of Yahweh defy explanation.

God is “wholly other”, by Divine Will, therefore, Yahweh cannot be controlled by magic as was the custom of other ancient Near Eastern peoples.<sup>10</sup> The Israelites considered Yahweh so separate and unique that no images were permitted to be crafted. Yahweh has no “likeness” to any created visible reality. The Ark, special as it is, is not a representation of God, although it is holy because of God; the Ark is merely God’s throne.

A further understanding of Israel’s perception of holiness may be gleaned from the terms associated with holiness. Wherever God’s *presence* is identified, holiness is evident as well. Holiness, although considered a state or condition, is, for the Israelites, principally a relationship. The force of holiness echoes in every sphere of existence; it is revealed through distinctive words and deeds. Through these relationships humanity comes to know of the presence of God involved in its world.

The God who is holy is often spoken of as a jealous God (Ex. 20 : 3–5; 34 : 14; Deut. 4 : 24; 6 : 15; Jos. 24 : 19; Ez. 39 : 25). This

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9. I. Efros. “Holiness and Glory in the Bible.” *Jewish Quarterly Review*. (1950) P. 363.  
10. Worden. *op. cit.* p. 9.

obvious anthropomorphism tries to emphasize the idea of Yahweh's uniqueness. A Semitic synonym for jealousy is zeal, and Von Rad considers zeal and holiness different emphases of the same characteristic.<sup>11</sup> Thus Yahweh demands exclusive worship, unlike the gods of contemporaneous religions which were more tolerant and even complemented one another.

Many different terms stress the apartness, the separateness of God. As was mentioned, in the well-known theophany of the burning bush, Moses is not terrified or curious even when reminded that the ground is holy because of God's presence. Indeed the holy, terrible, fearsome God, is praised in Psalm 89, verse 8: "A God feared in the assembly of the holy ones, great and revered above all around him." Man is simultaneously curious and fearful of what is reserved to God and, therefore, unknown.

The separateness and the mystery of God are also associated with majesty, splendour, and glory (Ps. 93 : 1-2; all of Ps. 104, but esp. verses 1-3; Ps. 145 : 5). The mysterious is underlined by the incomprehensible ways of God, Yahweh's unsearchable thoughts; God's wonderful and wondrous deeds point up the unpredictability of a God who works "wonders" according to a Divine plan (Ps. 139 : 6; Job 11 : 7-9; Is. 40 : 13-14). Similarly, the Exalted One is the God of awe and awesomeness stressed in the liturgical texts of the Old Testament (cf. the Psalms).<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the closeness of God is also described in a variety of theophanies, often symbolically indicated by fire. The burning bush and the pillar of flame guide the Chosen People through the wilderness and Mount Sinai (Ex. 24 : 16-18; Deut. 5 : 22-27; Judges 6 : 11-24; II Sam. 22 : 7-20; Ps. 18 : 6-19; Is. 10 : 16-17; Ez. 1 : 26-28). Several of these texts support the Akkadian origins for the root *qds*. Fire was also important in liturgical contexts as a foundational element of cult. These texts then, are useful in revealing concepts linked with holiness.

Fire captures some of the ambivalence associated with God's holiness : Fire is light and warm, suggesting the closeness of the

11. G. Von Rad. *Old Testament Theology*. London : SCM Press, 1975. Vol. 1. p. 205.

12. H. Ringgren. *op. cit.* p. 26.

presence of God. Yet fire is also consuming and may become a devouring inferno. Holiness, then, is simultaneously a terrible power and a benevolent blessing.

The proximity of God is described by the saving activity of God: God is the Holy One of Israel who delivers His people from the oppression of Egypt. Yahweh cares for and leads His people through the desert wilderness. God's presence accompanies the Israelites by the Ark of the Covenant, God helps the Israelites in battle and, God's presence remains in the Holy of Holies in the temple at Jerusalem.

When God enters the sphere of daily existence, holiness touches that existence and thereby transforms it. By such acts, God can make things outside Himself holy, certain persons or things may become holy or special. These things (and/or persons and places) are then reserved for Yahweh; they are set apart and separated from normal use from becoming holy. These persons, places, and/or things are not holy in themselves, but become so by reason of their being directly linked with God. Holiness is a relative and relational quality for such "others": what pertains to God is divorced from ordinary use. These "others" are holy only because of their relationship to Yahweh. Thus, for Israel, certain realities of the world stood in a special relationship to Yahweh and so were set apart—holy to the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, the laws about killing and eating animals can be better understood. Lev. 17: 10–14 makes explicit the common idea that the mystery of life is bound to God, that God alone gives life. Blood is the physical reality which in the Semitic understanding preserves life. Since life belonged to God, so too did the blood of an animal, therefore, blood was separated and not to be consumed with meat. In I Sam. 14: 32–35, the army of Saul transgresses by sacrificing animals on the ground, thereby allowing blood to be mixed with the meat. If the animal had been slaughtered on a raised stone, the blood would then have poured out on the ground or into bowls for offerings. Only then, would the blood, the life, be properly separated

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13. Dhorme. *La Religion des Hebreux nomades*. 1937, p.309. Dhorme held the position that the concept of holiness went in the direction of created reality back to God. The Israelites realized things as holy in their world and therefore reasoned back to the holiness which was a quality of God. But he is almost alone in his hypothesis. Most scholars hold that the direction was from God to other things in relation to Him.



from the meat which had a profane use: food. Because of their transgression in this regard, Saul and his army were rebuked.

Obviously, the holiness of other realities was not the same as the holiness of God. Indeed, the relationship of holiness often depended on the free choice of God.<sup>14</sup> Here, once again, we have a major difference between the Israelite and Canaanite religions: For the Israelite, religious activity depends on Yahweh; holiness does not come from the natural forces inherent in any created reality as it did for the Canaanites. It has been claimed that such personalization is one of the greatest contributions of the Israelite religion to western thought—perhaps even more significant than its stress on morality.<sup>15</sup>

### Contacting Holiness

Who and/or what then can be holy? Simply, Yahweh and everything that comes into contact with God. Holiness is where Yahweh reveals His person, His name, and whatever He chooses to reveal. By a process of assimilation, everything connected with cult and the temple itself becomes holy; thus, when the temple is destroyed by conquering enemies, it is spoken of as profaned (Ez. 25:3). The city of the temple, Jerusalem, and later the whole land of Israel gradually came to be considered holy. Even objects became holy, especially the Ark. Priests became holy, along with the objects of ritual, including the priests clothing. Certain days and seasons came to be set apart for Yahweh, and therefore became holy, the Sabbath, as the seventh day of the week, the day of rest, and as the sacred feast of Passover. The entire people of Israel came to be regarded as a holy nation, a people set apart from the nations of the world.

In several places in the Old Testament this God, who is holy, actively engages in war and demands the slaughter of the vanquished. (Cf. the fate of Jericho in Jos. 6, esp. verses 2 and 21). How could war be a holy act? An amplification of the notion of holy became the self-justifying ideological rationalization. Since Yahweh manifested His holiness by choosing and protecting the Hebrew people, war becomes an act of God. Indeed, God's mighty power made Israel victorious; the warriors of Israel had to prepare themselves, sanctify themselves, as participants in God's activity.

14. Leon-Dufour, ed. *op. cit.* p. 237.

15. W. Eichrodt. *Theology of the Old Testament*. London: SCM Press Vol. II, p. 276.

Since the battle was Yahweh's, the spoils of war were God's as well; so that what belonged to Yahweh would not be profaned. This is the origin of the idea of the "ban", the, (ḥrm), the destruction of all spoils of war, including the defeated survivors (Deut. 2:31-34): they could not be distributed to the victorious Israelites. Being set aside for Yahweh exclusively, the remains of the war had to be destroyed.

Ill effects would follow if the ban was not scrupulously obeyed (Jos. 7, the sequel to the fall of Jericho and cf. also I Sam. 15:9-11). Needless to add that when Israel lost a battle, it could scarcely be attributed to Yahweh's weakness: Yahweh was thought to have deserted the Israelites because of their error or sin.

We are now in a position to draw some conclusions: first of all, Yahweh as God is holiness itself. Persons, places, and/or things then become holy in relation to God. Something is holy if it has a special relationship to God. More precisely, whatever is separated for Yahweh is His own possession. By being removed from profane usage, an article, place, or person is related to the holiness of Yahweh.

The Israelites considered themselves set apart from all their neighbours manifesting the holiness of God; they therefore called themselves the Chosen People (Deut. 14:2; 26:19; 28:9; Ex. 19:6).<sup>16</sup>

Much of the Israelites' experience of God's holiness and their relation to it originated in liturgical worship. The Israelites are reminded throughout the Holiness Code to be a holy people.<sup>17</sup> "You are to be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy," resounds like a refrain throughout the chapters of the Holiness Code (Lev. 16:26; 19:2; 20:7, 8, 26; 21:6, 8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32). The context speaks of cult regulations, but externals were designed to reinforce the

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16. A corollary of this is that God never loses His holiness nor does He diminish when other realities are called holy. However, any other reality can lose its holiness. Holiness is a part of God's nature, if God lost holiness, He would no longer be God. Any person or thing is holy only by relation, not by nature. That relation may alter or terminate. Moreover, there is no room in Hebraic thought for pantheism.
  17. O. Eissfeldt. *The Old Testament: an Introduction*. Oxford, 1974, p. 233. Klostermann first coined the term "Holiness Code." This refers to the section of the Book of Leviticus from chapters 17 through 26 (according to Eissfeldt). The section is singled out because of its linguistic characteristics marking it as a specific entity. One of these characteristics is the phrase "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy."

*internal* conviction of holiness. Cultic laws are beyond taboos; there is a system and reason for the choice of the things that are declared holy.<sup>18</sup> Some items may have a special relation to God and help in revealing holiness during liturgy; these become sacred containing the mysterious power of God which renders them untouchable.

The aspect of ritual purity is related to, but different from, holiness. Confusion arises from traditions in the Bible where holiness takes on an almost mechanical aspect of contact or contagion, transferring holiness to objects. Here there may be a close connection between the profane and the unclean (Lev. 21 : 4; Ez. 43 : 7). Deut. 21 : 1-9, on the other hand, in the hand-washing ritual links apparent aspects of purity and moral rectitude. However, the prophets rail against this alliance of ritual purity and holiness which limits itself to an external<sup>19</sup> definition of holiness.

Holiness and uncleanness may be thought of as arising from similar taboo concepts. Yet we must be careful about creating of too close a connection: while uncleanness derives from elements originating in taboo traditions, holiness is closely connected to divinity.<sup>20</sup> Taboos, after all, emphasize negativity, arising from fear of the unknown holiness, however, is more positive. Holiness implies awe and respect leading to blessing. Certainly, relation to the divinity for the Hebrews than a negative taboo of uncleanness.

Holiness has been explained as the opposite of the common or profane; cleanness is opposed to uncleanness. It is understandable that one must be ritually pure to approach the holy in cult; thus hence the purification rites for the priests arose. What is not obvious is how those who approach the holy are rendered unclean. For example, the rabbis speak of one who touches the sacred books of the Torah as then having hands that are unclean; such a person must be purified after touching the sacred scrolls. Similarly, the vestments of the priests at cultic functions are spoken of as having become unclean. The hidden principle is that holiness is transferable; what comes into contact with the holy is affected by that contact (*viz.*, Lev. 6 : 18). As it too becomes holy, it must be separated from the common. What

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18. Eichrodt. *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 274.

19. Another source of confusion is that the root *qds* is sometimes translated *katharos* as well as the more common and expected *hagios*.

20. Ringgren. *op. cit.* p. 14 and 16.

comes into contact does not become divine but enters into relationship with the divine, being set apart and made holy.<sup>21</sup>

Purity becomes a prerequisite for the person who enters into a special relationship with the divine. The people, especially the priests, were obliged to sanctify themselves, to make themselves ready to approach the holiness of God in cult. The Israelite people are a holy people by reason of their existing election by God, yet the purity regulations serve vital connecting function. Each liturgy is an external manifestation, a renewal of that special election. It is thus through cult that the Israelites and their priests approach and experience the holiness of God, reminded of their relationship to the source of holiness.

### **Witnesses to Holiness : The Prophets**

The prophets are heirs of this same tradition. All the laws, both cultic and moral, were responses to the Holy Will that decreed them. The prophets accepted the traditional notions of holiness that were part of the Israelite heritage. Amos speaks of God swearing by His holiness (Amos 4 : 2 ; 6 : 8), implying a realization of God's nature identified with holiness. In 2 : 7, Amos condemns the profaning of the holy name thereby emphasizing his contempt.<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah recognizes the holiness of God by using the title "Holy One of Israel" (Jer. 50 : 29 ; 51 : 5). Later rabbinic literature uses "the Holy One, blessed be He". Hosea speaks of the difference between God and the human, a key to the Old Testament conception of holiness (Hos. 11 : 9). Hosea

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21. This is logical, but it becomes complicated when one reads in the law codes of the uncleanness of, for instance, lepers and those suffering from other illnesses (Lev. 13). Ofcourse, one would not say these people are holy in the sense discussed above. While such a concept of holiness would not apply, the concept of uncleanness does hold. Like anything else unclean (for whatever reason) the person unclean through sickness must also be separated (for the good of the rest of the community, not necessarily for the good of the person). If and when the leprosy, or whatever illness, clears up, the priests will determine that the person may undergo ritual purification and return to the common life of the community. The idea of being separated is operative through all of these examples, although for quite different reasons! This logic holds through differing contexts. An additional support is found in Lxx 20 : 24-25 ; the whole people of Israel, being sparated from other people by God must, therefore, make distinctions between clean and unclean because of their special status.

22. Eichrodt. *op. cit.* Vol. I, p. 279.

also stresses the personal, individual aspect of a relationship with God (Hos. 11 : 1-4 ; 14 : 4-7).<sup>23</sup>

It is among the prophets that this idea of the relational aspect of holiness having moral connotations begins to emerge with strong emphasis. Moral precepts become as important as the cultic regulations of purity. Purity regulations help one approaching God through liturgy and, therefore, express a particular relationship between God and His purified people. But moral precepts are also a part of this Code. The moral and social commandments guide humans in developing this relationship with the divine. Moral connections with holiness are found throughout the Old Testament: some examples are Ps. 24 : 3-4 clean hands and a pure heart are necessary for a holy place ; Wis. 1 : 5 a holy person has a disciplined spirit which flees deceit ; Wis. 5 : 5 the righteous man is numbered among the saints that is, the holy). Gradually a moral understanding of holiness develops clarifying itself in the New Testament.

Several prophets point to ethical considerations as part of their conception of God's holiness. These prophets stress the more personal aspects of the relation to God and the moral considerations flowing therefrom. Isaiah is a good example. Some commentators claim that Isaiah grafted the ethics or to holiness.<sup>24</sup> He re-affirms the absoluteness of divine holiness and links many different images from the original tradition. Thus, light and fire become key metaphors (Is. 10 : 16-17 ; 30 : 27-28 ; 31 : 9) and God is called the "light of Israel."

Isaiah uses the title "Holy One of Israel" for Yahweh, especially when criticizing the moral failures of the people (Is. 1 : 4 ; 5 : 19, 24). On the other hand, in Is. 10 : 20, the Holy One is the hope of the remnant for salvation.

It is interesting to contrast the reactions of Moses and Isaiah with the theophanies which distinguished their individual callings. In the burning bush scene of Ex. 3, Moses is drawn by curiosity to the thorn-bush which is on fire and yet not consumed. Moses is drawn to this "mysterium fascinans"; elements of awe are present, but not fear. Isaiah too is full of awe, but his reaction draws attention to his unworthiness before the holy: Is. 6 : 3; "And one called to another,

23. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. II, p. 621.

24. Eichrodt. *op. cit.* Vol. I p. 363.

'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, all the earth is full of his glory'." Verse 4: "And the foundations of the thresholds shook from the voice of the one calling and the house was filled with smoke." Verse 5: "And I said, 'Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and in the midst of a people with unclean lips I am dwelling, for my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts'." Isaiah recognizes the holy and proclaims the well-known trisagion from the Seraphim. He also speaks of his own state before such holiness, recognizing his need for forgiveness. Verse 6; "Then one of the Seraphim flew to me. In his hand was a burning coal which he had taken with things from the altar." Verse 7; "And he touched my mouth and said, 'This has touched your lips, your guilt is removed and your sin forgiven'." This element of atonement is lacking in the experience of Moses.<sup>25</sup>

Ezekiel has a different focus. He relates the holiness of God to the greatness and power of God (Ez. 36: 20–24).<sup>26</sup> God manifests His holiness by displaying great power; the proof of God's greatness is His ability to overcome adversity and His enemies. As a result, even the non-Israelites recognize his holiness. Ez. 36: 23: "I will consecrate my great name which has been profaned among the nations and which you have profaned among them and the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when I show my holiness through you before them."

Clearly the prophets develop different emphases regarding holiness. Their reflection enriches the concept and deepens our understanding of God's holiness. The priestly strain of the historical books of the Old Testament lean more toward cultic concerns and purification in preparation for worship; the prophets are more concerned with the moral aspects of holiness, yet these emphases are fundamentally complementary.

The priests were understandably concerned with worship, since worship expresses the relation between individuals and their God. Moreover, worship can only take place where God is recognized as holy. Yet a large part of the Holiness Code, and other sections of the historical books, are concerned with the relations between indivi-

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25. Note that the moral element is missing in the story of Uzzah as well.

26. Ringgren. *op. cit.* p. 28.

duals. The Ten Commandments would be the clearest example of this relational emphasis.

On the other hand, the prophets often point out the moral failures of individuals, especially rulers, as well as the nation as a whole. Their aim is a call to conversion, to the restoration of the holy covenant God has offered. But this is not done entirely without cultic awareness; the prophets often use liturgical settings for their words. The cult can express the relationship to both God and neighbour which the prophets are trying to restore. At the same time, the prophets spoke against relying too heavily on cultic observance especially if it meant neglecting personal morality.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, holiness for the Israelites is a concept as influential as the Old Testament itself. It is as profound as God, for it attempts an insight into the divine nature. Through hundreds of expressions of the root (qds) in the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites were reminded of a God both totally separate and other than man and his world. Yet holiness is dual: it is at the same time awesome and alluring. It is dynamic, reaching into the very activity of the world, for it is also relational. Whoever and whatever contacts holiness becomes holy because of the dynamism of God. God *wondrously*, never diminishes in his holiness, and the object of the relation never becomes totally divine. Moreover, such proximity to God brings dangers as well as blessings; an overwhelming power pervades all existence. Yet holiness is a personal call by God enabling one to unite personal conduct with community morality.

The presence of holiness pervades the Old Testament; it is the vocation of the historical writers, the priests, the prophets, the psalmists, and sages to articulate the meaning of holiness for Israel. While the Bible is the inspired record of God's and deeds in history, holiness is the interpretive hermeneutical key; dynamic, continuing to inspire even in our own time.

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27. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. II, p. 622.