### God’s Holiness

**1. Terminology**

The words translated “holiness” are קָדֵשׁ (*kadesh*) and ἁγιασμός (*hagiasmos*). Both mean “separation.” The Lord’s holiness, according to Ury, “sets him apart from everything else.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The idea of “separation” has two aspects. First, God is separate from His creation. He is greater both in essence and in status. We might call this His “majesty.” Second, Yahweh is separate from sin. This is His “moral excellence.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The concept of the Lord’s majesty refers to the unique place He holds in relation to creation. In every way, he excels it. He is “separate” in the sense that nothing can compare with Him or rival Him. Therefore, we can classify His majesty as one aspect of His holiness. We will study God’s majesty more in chapter 13.

We devote the present chapter, however, to the second aspect of God’s holiness – His moral excellence. He is without sin and separate from all that does not correspond to His holy nature. Believers are called to share in God’s holiness in a moral sense. On the other hand, God in His majesty will always be “separate” from us. There is no one like the Lord’s, and there never will be.

**2. Biblical Data**

Before we undertake our investigation of the biblical data, we will say a few words about the historical and cultural milieu of the Ancient Near East.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the ancient world, holiness was purely a devise to instill fear in the worshiper. People worshiped their gods primarily to appease them and not incur their wrath. They lacked a personal relationship with their gods. Unlike pagan religion, though, as Ury notes, “Yahweh is looking for those who are willing to ‘walk’ with him rather than cower in fear alone.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The following biblical passages enlighten us as to the nature of Yahweh’s holiness.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the beginning of biblical history, God’s “separateness” was on display when Adam and Eve committed the first sin – they were banished from the Garden of Eden and became separated from the Lord (Gen 3:24). In addition, after Cain’s transgression, he anticipated alienation from Yahweh: “From Your face I will be hidden” (Gen 4:14). Finally, in the days of Noah, the Lord could no longer tolerate the sinful behavior of people on earth and destroyed them with a flood (Gen 6-8).

Moreover, in the Torah we learn of special places that were sanctified or made holy by the presence of the Lord. When Yahweh appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He commanded him, “Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). Joshua experienced the same when he encountered “the captain of Yahweh’s host” (Josh 5:15).

The Mosaic Law proscribed certain behaviors for Yahweh’s people. These also reflect God’s holiness. The sense of “separateness” was particularly expressed in a series of taboos and ordinances concerning physical distance and ceremonial purity. For example, when God was planning to “descend” on Mount Sinai, He warned Moses to prepare the people: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments” (Ex 19:10). The men were also forbidden to “go near a woman” (Ex 19:15).

Furthermore, Moses marked off “bounds for the people all around” so that no one would touch the mountain on which the holy God was about to descend (Ex 19:12). The leaders were allowed to ascend the mountain, but Moses alone was allowed to “come near to Yahweh” (Ex 24:1-2). The Lord strictly warned, “No man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain” (Ex 34:3). While in the wilderness, the people kept there distance as well from the tabernacle, which was “a good distance from the camp” (Ex 33:7).

Moses received special directions concerning how to construct the tabernacle (Ex 25-30). When all the articles for the tabernacle were constructed, they were dedicated by anointing with oil (Ex 40:9-11). Even the oil itself was consider “holy” in the sense that it was prepared from a special recipe that others were forbidden to copy for common use (Ex 30:22-33).[[6]](#footnote-6) Additionally, the tabernacle and it articles were sanctified by special offerings (Lev 8:15; 16:32-33).

Restrictions were also in place as to who could serve in the tabernacle – only priests in the line of Aaron (Num 3:10, 38) and their assistants, the Levites (Num 8). Only the priests could actually enter the tabernacle, while the Levites disassembled, carried, and reassembled it (Num 1:51). Only the high priest could enter into the Holy of Holies, following a strict regime (Lev 16). Although the “laypeople” were excepted from the priesthood, they could nonetheless make a special vow to the Lord – the “Nazirite vow,” which would make them “holy to Yahweh” (Num 6:8).

It was even proscribed how the priests should be attired. Their special clothing was sanctified by ritual, which included sprinkling with blood and oil (see Ex 28-29; Lev 8). The high priest wore a plate of pure gold inscribed with the words “holy to Yahweh” (Ex 28:36). The priests who served in the tabernacle had to take special care to “cover {their} bare flesh” (Ex 28:42; сf. Ex 20:25-26). They had specific instructions for their personal purity as well (Ex 30:17-21; Lev 6:9-11; 10:8-10).

Offerings to God were under strict regulation. The bread for offerings must always be unleavened (Ex 23:18; Lev 6:17). All animal offerings were to be “without defect”: “You shall not sacrifice to Yahweh your God an ox or a sheep which has a blemish {or} any defect, for that is a detestable thing to Yahweh your God” (Deut 17:1).[[7]](#footnote-7) A priest who had any physical defect could not present offerings (Lev 21:16-23).

The people were to offer their sacrifices only at the tabernacle (Lev 17:5). When bringing sacrifices, ceremonial purity was to be observed (Lev 22; 7:19-21). Violation of ceremonial purity could cost the priest his life (Lev 10:1-2). The Lord said, “By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy” (Lev 10:3). Even common objects which by accident touched holy things, became holy themselves (Num 16:36-40; Lev 6:18, 27-28).

The people of Yahweh were to revere the name of the Lord: “You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel” (Lev 22:32). Israel was forbidden to swear falsely by Yahweh’s name (Lev 19:12). In addition, “The one who blasphemes the name of Yahweh shall surely be put to death” (Lev 24:16).

Special ordinances existed for food (Lev 11; 20:25; Ex 22:31) so that Israel would learn to “make a distinction between the unclean and the clean” (Lev 11:47). Particularly, the eating of blood and fat were strictly forbidden (Lev 3:17; 7:22-27; 19:26).

Finally, certain regulations were in place to ensure the personal purity of the people concerning such issues as excrements (Deut 23:13), childbirth (Lev 12:1-8), discharges from the body (Lev 15), eating animals torn by beasts (Lev 17:15), tattoos (Lev 19:28), cutting beards (Lev 19:27), mixing of grain, cloth, and types of animals (Lev 19:19), touching an unclean animal or a corpse (Lev 5:2-3; Num 5:2), disposing of the corpse of an executed criminal (Deut 21:23), handling the booty after a military victory (Num 31:19-25), and regulations for lepers (Num 5:2). Certain persons were excluded from the assembly: one who was “emasculated or has his male organ cut off,” and “one of illegitimate birth” (Deut 23:1-2).

So then, to be considered holy, the people of Israel were obliged to observe both the moral and ceremonial laws, because Yahweh was holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 21:8). Their consecration to the Lord included separation from the surrounding nations and their practices as well (Lev 20:26). Finally, Tozer reminds us of metaphor for God’s holiness – fire, which often accompanies His presence (Ex 19:18) and issues from Him in judgment (Lev 10:2).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Engaging the Old Testament historical books, we discover more applications of the ceremonial laws. Joshua, for example, allowed only the Levites to carry the ark of the covenant (Josh 3:3). David violated that ordinance, however, and brought harm to God’s people (2 Sam 6:3ff). The inhabitants of Beth-shemesh also suffered from showing disrespect to the ark (1 Sam 6:19). In connection with the conquest of Canaan, the Lord received His portion of the booty (Josh 6:18-19), but also punished Israel for failure to respect what was His (Josh 7:11-12).

In all things, Yahweh showed Himself to be a holy God. Hannah acknowledged, “There is no one holy like the Yahweh, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God” (1 Sam 2:2). Yet, Joshua warned that it is difficult for sinful people to serve the holy Lord: “You will not be able to serve Yahweh, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God” (Josh 24:19).

The Psalms speak of Yahweh’s holiness more in the sense of moral excellence. Ceremonial purity is actually contrasted with moral purity, with emphasis on the latter (Ps 39:7-9; сf. 1 Sam 15:22; Prov 21:3). Psalm 99 affirms that God is holy and worth of praise: “Exalt Yahweh our God and worship at His footstool; Holy is He” (v. 5); “Exalt Yahweh our God and worship at His holy hill, for holy is Yahweh our God” (v. 9). Holy is His name (Ps 111:9; 99:3; 33:21), His habitation (Ps 11:4; 93:5; 87:1-2), and His ways (Ps 77:13). The way to Him is the way of holiness (Ps 24:3-5; 4:3). He hates evil (Ps 5:4; сf. Zech 8:17; Hab 1:13).

We will conclude our survey of the Old Testament teaching by examining the prophetic books. Isaiah pays special attention to this topic. In his well-known vision of chapter 6, he saw the Lord and heard the seraphim exclaim, “Holy, holy, holy, is Yahweh of hosts” (Isa 6:3). The adjective “holy” is repeated three times to emphasize this attribute of God.

In addition, in the book of Isaiah God is called the “Holy One” or the “Holy One of Israel” (see 1:4; 5:19, 24; 31:1; 40:25; 41:14; 43:14; 55:5; 60:9). Other Old Testament books mention this name as well, but not as frequently as Isaiah.[[9]](#footnote-9) His name is holy (Isa 57:15). His habitation is holy as well (Isa 11:9; 56:7).[[10]](#footnote-10) The Sabbath is His holy day (Isa 58:13).

Yahweh’s holiness inspires reverence among God’s people (Isa 8:13). Yahweh “will show Himself holy in righteousness” (Isa 5:16). As in the Psalms, in Isaiah moral holiness is stressed over ceremonial purity (Isa 1:12-17; 58:1-10). Hosea affirms this as well, “For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).

In conclusion, several features of Ezekiel’s prophecy interest us. Here, Yahweh again insists on holy behavior, but His holiness is also demonstrated to the Gentiles through His deliverance of His people (Ezek 20:40-41). Ceremonial holiness is also reintroduced in connection with the order of worship in the eschatological temple (see Ezek 42:13, 20; 43:7-9; 44:23; 45:1-6).

In the Gospels and the book of Acts, the word “holy” is mainly used in reference to the Third Person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, it sometimes refers to God the Son (Lk 1:35; Jn 6:69; Acts 3:14; 4:27, 30) or God the Father (Jn 17:11). The following things are called holy: God’s name (Lk 1:49; Matt 6:9), His angels (Lk 9:26; Acts 10:22), His prophets (Lk 1:70; Acts 3:21), and His covenant (Lk 1:72). Everything having to do with the Lord is holy.[[11]](#footnote-11) Although the noun “holiness” is not used in these books, Jesus calls His disciples to holy living in line with God’s holy nature (Matt 5-7). The Early Church held to a high ethical standard (Acts 5:1-12).

The epistles repeat many of these themes, callingGod’s Spirit, God’s angels (Jude 14), and God’s people holy **(**1 Pet 2:5-9). God Himself is holy, as is the place where He manifests His glory (2 Pet 1:18), His Word (Rom 1:2; 7:12; 2 Pet 2:21), and those to whom He revealed it (Eph 3:5; 2 Pet 3:2). Just as the tabernacle and temple were consecrated to the Lord in the Old Testament, the Churсh is also consecrated to Him and considered holy (1 Cor 3:17; Eph 2:21; 5:27).

The theme of the Lord’s holiness finds even greater expression in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Here we find mention of God’s holy tabernacle (Heb 9:2-8), which was made according to the pattern of His heavenly one (Heb 9:12-25). Jesus entered that heavenly tabernacle as the holy high priest (Heb 7:26), where He accomplished propitiation with His blood. In virtue of His sacrifice, we now have boldness to enter the Holy of Holies, that is, into the Lord’s presence (Heb 10:19). In regard to God’s holiness, the author of Hebrews also writes, “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).

The New Testament book featuring God’s holiness most of all is the book of Revelation, where we learn of the culmination of His plan. We often see the Lord characterized as holy: “He who is holy” (Rev 3:7); “O Lord, holy and true” (Rev 6:10); “You alone are holy” (Rev 15:4); and, “Righteous are You… O Holy One” (Rev 16:5). Similar to Isaiah’s vision, John beholds angels surrounding the throne exclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy {is} the Lord God, the Almighty” (Rev 4:8). His holiness is manifest in His judgments (Rev 16:5) and instils fear (Rev 15:4). The Lord’s final habitation, the New Jerusalem, is also holy (Rev 21:2, 10; 22:19).

In addition, many New Testament books speak of God’s holiness under the figure of “light.” He “dwells in unapproachable light” and is Himself light – there is no darkness or sin in Him (1 Jn 1:5; 3:5). Moreover, He “cannot be tempted by evil” (Jam 1:13). James also asserts, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (Jam 1:17).

**3. Conclusions**

God is holy, that is, distinct from all that does not correspond to His majesty or moral excellence. Bloesch considers that holiness, along with love, constitute God’s internal nature.[[12]](#footnote-12) In the Old Testament, the Lord’s holiness was expressed not only in the ordinances determining His people’s behavior, but also in laws concerning ceremonial purity. The New Testament focuses on the moral aspect of God’s holiness.

Although no one will ever rival the Lord’s uniqueness in majesty, His people are called to be holy like Him in their behavior: “Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all {your} behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16). So then, our response to the revelation of God’s holiness as majesty is worship. Our response to the revelation of God’s holiness as moral excellence is imitation.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Finally, we will briefly mention Rudolph Otto’s well-known treatment of this topic, who emphasized the Lord’s transcendence in his theology, calling Him “Other.” He theorized that people react to God’s holiness in two ways. On the one hand, it attracts people, but on the other hand, it also frightens them. Thus, a certain tension arises between these two poles.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, we will look in detail at various aspects of the Lord’s holy nature, namely righteousness, justice, and faithfulness.

1. Ury M. W. Holiness, Holy // Elwell W. A. Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996. – P. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TХ: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 6. – P. 325; Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. electronic ed. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999. – V. 1. – P. 456-457. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ury, p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 41-43; Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 138; Henry, v. 6, p. 324-326. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The same order was in place for preparing the incense for offerings (Ex 30:34-38). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Also see Lev 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32; 6:6; 22:17-25; Num 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tozer A. W. The Attributes of God. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 166-167. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For example: Ps 89:18; Prov 9:10; Hos 11:9; Hab 1:12; Jer 51:5; Ezek 39:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Also see Jon 2:4; Hab 2:20; Mic 1:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ury, p. 934-935. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bloesch, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Henry, v. 6, p. 326-327. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)