

The Meaning of Holy

“You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Leviticus 20:26).

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Any discussion of biblical holiness properly begins with the nature of God. Holiness is not one of several attributes of God; it is His very essence. God proclaims, “I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2), and no other description of God occurs in this manner in the Old Testament. God is the one source of holiness.

Israel began to understand the holiness of God at Mount Sinai. There, all of the accompanying signs—fire, smoke, lightning, the shaking earth, the loud voice—served to emphasize the awe-full holiness of God. By contrast, pagan nations of Israel’s day only rarely referred to their gods as being holy.

What Is the Meaning of Holy in the Old Testament?

The basic meaning of the Hebrew word for “holy” (*qadosh* and its related forms) is the idea of apartness or separateness. Initially, this term was used to express that whatever is holy is to be set apart from other things. This can be seen in the description of the priests and the furnishings of the tabernacle. They were holy, set apart, separated from ordinary human beings and furnishings, and used for divine purposes. When *qadosh* is applied to God, it reveals that He is totally different from creation; God is unique, in a class by himself.

Israel was called holy in this sense; the people were chosen by God as His “own possession among all the peoples” (Exodus 19:5, NASB). Israel was to be a separate people, distinguished by the law that was revealed to them. They were not to follow in the ways of the world. In 2 Corinthians 7:1b, Paul emphasizes this aspect of holiness by commanding, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Qadosh carries both a message of separation from and the more positive message of separation to someone or something. In Israel’s case, they were separated to the mission and purpose of God, as found in Exodus 19:6a: “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” For God’s people today, both aspects of holiness are important. We must be both separated *from* the world as well as separated *to* God’s will.

The Clean and the Unclean

The Old Testament says much about holiness as separation, especially in distinguishing between the clean and the unclean. While a

full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, we will attempt to summarize the important aspects.

Leviticus 10:10 uses two opposites (“the holy and the common,” “the unclean and the clean”) as illustrations of holiness. The “holy” begins with God and extends to all persons and things related to Him. “Common” refers to natural things that are neither holy nor unclean.

The distinction between the “clean” and the “unclean” is ultimately theological and spiritual in nature, having nothing to do with hygiene. That which is “unclean” is an abomination to God; it is in opposition to Him and is excluded from fellowship with Him.

There are three main areas of life where distinctions between “clean” and “unclean” appear. The first area we will consider is animals. Certain animals were offered as sacrifices to pagan gods and were associated with demons and evil powers. These were therefore considered “unclean.” While there may have been some consideration of health issues in identifying unclean animals, the basic underlying principle is theological: the unclean, because of their association with pagan rituals and evil powers, affected relationship to the holy God. Leviticus 11 lists all of the clean and unclean animals (see vv. 46-47).

In the laws dealing with sexual matters, the theological reason is even more apparent. We know that Canaanite religion was highly erotic and degenerate. There were male and female prostitutes connected with their temples and worship. The gods and goddesses were associated with immoral rituals and myths. In contrast, Israel’s restrictions on sexuality were highly moral, permitting no aberrant behavior.

Finally, we see a strong theological basis in the laws relating to death. Pagan worship included the ceremonial worship of the dead. Israel’s laws stated that contact with a corpse caused uncleanness, especially among the priests (Leviticus 21:1-4, 10-11). Once again, Israel’s laws provided a safeguard against an element of paganism.

There are many other distinctions between clean/unclean, especially in the category of the animals used for food. Many animals considered unclean were not associated with pagan worship. The apparent underlying principle in these cases was the concept of normality and wholeness.

Holiness required that persons and objects conform to defined norms; otherwise they were unclean. For instance, fish with scales

and fins were considered clean; those without were ruled unclean. Sheep and goats had cloven feet and chewed their cud and were considered clean. Pigs had cloven feet but did not chew their cud and therefore were considered unclean.

Moreover, different classes of things were not to be mixed together. There was a correct order to creation; therefore, mixing different classes of things produced uncleanness. For example, Leviticus 19:19 forbids the breeding of different kinds of cattle, sowing a field with two kinds of seed, and wearing a garment of two kinds of material.

The apparent general purpose behind the distinction between clean and unclean was to delineate Israel's separation from the world and to encourage a life of fellowship with God. The distinctions that were drawn were not merely external and physical. They represented obedience to, and faith in, the laws of God. In other words, these distinctions carried spiritual significance. Cleansing from the defilement of the unclean can be viewed as grace, the way to restore fellowship with God.

An important note must be made here. In the above analysis, we are talking strictly about the way in which ceremonial law functioned. This is not to say that the laws on sexuality, for instance, did not also have a moral basis. When God told Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15), God was not giving permission for people to commit immoral sexual acts—He was reminding Peter that believers have been released from the obligation

of following ceremonial law (i.e., dietary laws, clothing restrictions, sacrifices, etc.), a release made possible by Christ's "once for all" sacrifice on the cross (see Acts 15; Colossians 2:14; Galatians 2:16; 3:23-25; Hebrews 10:8-14).

The Moral and Ethical Aspect of Holiness

The Hebrew word *qadosh* also carries with it the meaning of pure. God as holy is not only separate but also good. This moral and ethical understanding of God influenced and determined the Old Testament understanding of holiness.

In Leviticus 19:2 and elsewhere, the Lord declares, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (NRSV). God demanded that Israel conform to His holy nature in their character and being. Because humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), they are also capable, by the grace and power of God, of reflecting the divine image.

There is a wholeness or completeness in biblical holiness that is well represented by the Hebrew word *shalom* or peace. This word has positive overtones of wholeness, completeness, well-being, blessing, salvation, and perfection. This holistic approach to holiness in the Old Testament is revealed by the fact that the law gives guidelines for every area of life, not just worship. God is the source of *shalom*, and the person with *shalom* has need of nothing.

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