An Inclusive Vision of the Holy Life

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Exhortations calling God’s people to a life of holiness permeate Scripture. 1 Peter 1:15-16 is perhaps the most familiar and representative of them: “But as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (RSV).

But what does it mean to be holy? What shape should holiness take in the believer’s life? When one turns to the various Christian traditions in searching for an answer to these questions, it becomes clear that they offer different conceptions of the holy life. The monastic tradition’s conception of the nature of the holy life is different from the conception of the mystical tradition’s, the conception of the reformed tradition differs from the conception of the Wesleyan tradition, and the conception of the holiness movement of the nineteenth century differs from the conception of twentieth century pentecostalism. Which tradition is closest to the biblical understanding?

A prior question needs to be considered: What does Scripture mean when it says that God is holy? 1 Peter says: “...as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves” [italics mine]. This seems to imply that what holiness means in the Christian’s life must be defined and determined by what holiness is in God. This does not mean that our holiness is in any way to be exactly identified with the holiness of God. Nevertheless, it is analogous to God’s holiness. If we are to arrive at a proper biblical conception of the holy life, we must first be clear in our understanding of the holiness of God. Only then can we begin to describe the shape of the holy life.

The purpose of this article is to examine the biblical conception of the holiness of God in order to understand the nature of the holy life. In examining the biblical conception, we will focus almost exclusively on the Old Testament, where the concept is developed. (It is generally agreed that the New Testament builds upon the Old Testament concept, and does not add anything substantially new.) We will focus particularly on one passage in the Old Testament, Isaiah 6:1-8, allowing it to function as a window through which we can view the OT understanding of holiness as a whole.

In Isaiah 6:1-8, we find the familiar account of the prophet’s vision of

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God, his call and his commissioning as a prophet. It is the holiness of
God, above all else, with which Isaiah is confronted. The trisagion, as it
is sometimes called, the “Holy, Holy, Holy” uttered by the seraphim, captures the essence of the vision.

Moreover, the holiness of God is not only central in the vision of God
which is recorded here, it is also a central motif throughout Isaiah. As
Otto Procksch observes, “the concept of holiness is central to the whole
theology of Isaiah.” The prophet’s favorite title for Yahweh, “the Holy
One of Israel,” found twenty-six times in the book, is instructive. Indeed,
in Isaiah, the Old Testament conception of divine holiness reaches its
summit. Thus, Isaiah (and 6:1-8 in particular) is a prime passage in which
to examine the biblical conception of the holiness of God.

As we examine this passage it becomes evident that holiness (qōdesh)
when attributed to or associated with God, is not narrowly conceived or
understood. It does not have a precise, exact meaning, but, depending
upon its context, is closely linked with other divine attributes or charac-
teristics. Holiness in relation to God is not an exclusive concept, but an
inclusive one. In fact, Isaiah 6 indicates that there are several divine
attributes or characteristics associated with the holiness of God. Each of
these must be recognized as a facet of divine holiness if it is to be properly
conceived. We turn then to a discussion of each of these facets of the
holiness of God in order to show how it is reflected, particularly in Isaiah
6, and then in a few other passages in the Old Testament.

GOD’S UNRIVALED MAJESTY (TRANSCENDENCE)

In his description of his vision of God and the action of the seraphim,
Isaiah stresses God’s otherness. His separateness from all creation.

Isaiah sees the Lord “high and lifted up” (v 1). The idea of the height of
God is a recurring theme in the book of Isaiah. In 2:5-22, the writer describes Yahweh as going on a campaign to bring not only
humanity down to size, but also anything else that appears tall—fortified
walls, ships on the sea, even stately trees and large mountains. Isaiah is
greatly impressed by the otherness of God, the immense distance that
separates Him from all other creatures.

When Isaiah describes God’s appearance, he goes no higher than the
hem of God’s robe! This parallels other Old Testament accounts where
persons are said to have “seen God.” For instance, in Exod 24:9-10 Moses
and the elders of Israel “saw the God of Israel,” but all they saw was the
pavement under God’s feet.

The action of the seraphim further underscores the transcendence of
God: “With two [wings] he covered his face, and with two he covered his
feet, and with two he flew” (v 2). By covering their faces, the seraphim
recognize that because of the infinite distance between them, the creature
dare not even look upon the Creator. Even heavenly beings, the highest
of creatures, dare not do that. By covering their feet or private parts
the seraphim acknowledge that the created should not be displayed in the presence of the Creator. Thus, as Kaiser suggests, “the attitude of the angelic beings emphasizes the infinite distance between God and every creature, and recalls the holiness of God to Isaiah.”

Other Old Testament passages bear evidence of this close association between divine holiness and divine transcendence. For example, in the account of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3), God commands Moses not to come any closer and to take off his sandals, “for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (v 5). Moses’s response is similar to the seraph’s: he “hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (v 6).

To affirm that God is holy, then, is to affirm that there is an “infinite qualitative difference” (Kierkegaard) between the creature and the Creator, the human and the divine. There is no ontological continuity between the two; rather, there is an absolute gulf fixed between them which cannot be crossed. Emil Brunner expresses it well: “The border line which separates the nature of God from all other forms of existence...is not only a frontier line, it is a closed frontier.”

However, this emphasis on God’s unrivaled majesty (transcendence) as an element of divine holiness, as clear and pronounced as it is, is not presented in the Old Testament in a manner which negates or obscures the immanence of God. Instead a beautiful balance is maintained between the two. In Isa 6:1, God is “high and lifted up” (transcendent), and yet “his train filled the temple” (immanent). In verse 3, He is “the Lord God of hosts” (transcendent) and yet “the whole earth is full of his glory” (immanent).

This balance is consistent with what Brunner describes as the two “movements” of divine holiness. The first is a movement of withdrawal and exclusion: God separates Himself, He sets Himself apart, from creation. He is the Transcendent One, the Wholly Other. The second is a movement of expansion and inclusion. This movement seems initially to contradict the first, but it actually completes and fulfills it. For as the Holy One, God wills to be recognized as Holy, and wants the whole earth to be filled with His glory. He is not content simply to be holy in Himself; He desires to make holy. Hence God’s holiness is the basis of His self-communication which is fulfilled in His love. In this balance, He is transcendent, apart from His creation, but also immanent, near to it, seeking to share Himself with it.

GOD’S GLORIOUS RADIANCE (GLORY)

In relation to Isaiah 6, T.C. Vriezen states: “In this text Yahweh’s holiness is also linked closely with His glory. This association of qôdesh and kabôd is found again and again in the Old Testament.” Of course this link is explicit in the antiphonal song of the seraphs: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” [italics mine]. But it is also implicit in Isaiah’s description that God’s train “filled the temple” and therefore the whole earth was full of His glory.

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temple” (v 1) and the temple was “filled with smoke” (v 4).

Smoke, as John Oswalt suggests, is “reminiscent of the cloud said to accompany the presence of God” and calls to mind the many other Old Testament passages associated with divine holiness where the presence of God is manifested in fire (Exod 3:1-6, 19:17-19, 40:34-38; Lev 10:1-3; Num 11:1-2; 1 Kgs 18:22-40; 2 Chr 7:1-3). These passages clearly show the link between holiness and glory.

What exactly is the kabôd, or glory of God? Simply stated, it is the visible external manifestation of the presence of God on earth. Furthermore, that holiness and the divine presence are closely linked should come as no surprise to us, for as we have noted, God is holy and wills to be recognized as holy. It matters to God whether His creatures do His will and confess His name. The glory of God is the radiant power of His being, the energy of His will seeking to make Himself known. It is God moving out of Himself, seeking to communicate Himself to His creation and to be recognized by it. As such it is a part of the second movement of His holiness, viz., expansion and inclusion.

GOD’S INFINITE POWER

Isaiah 6 also reflects a close association between the holiness of God and the power of God. Isaiah describes Yahweh as “sitting upon a throne” (v 1). As Holladay indicates, Isaiah saw God “functioning as a king.” In Isaiah’s time, unlike our own, the function of a king was perfectly clear in everyone’s mind. The king was the government; he was the ruler—usually in an absolute sense. All might and authority rested in his hands. Describing God as “sitting upon a throne” underscores His sovereignty and power.

Also, twice in Isaiah 6 (vv 3 and 5) God is described as “the Lord of hosts” or “the Lord Almighty” (Yahweh Sabaoth). According to Vriezen, this title is to be “taken in its most intense meaning” as “embracing all powers in heaven and on earth.” Kaiser believes that it came into use during the period of the judges when Israel began to consciously recognize Yahweh’s cosmic power and to set it over against the claims of the Canaanite pantheon. Thus it was an affirmation that “the holy God, the Lord over all the powers and forces which form and control this world, possesses the power to make his will prevail in the world.”

The power of God is further conveyed in Isaiah 6 by the thunderous voices of the seraphim (which cause the doorposts of the temple to shake) as well as by the smoke which fills the sanctuary. There is an obvious similarity here with the description of the meeting of God and the people of Israel on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16-19). There the lighting and thunder, the smoke, and the trembling of the mountain created the same awesome sense of Yahweh’s infinite power.

What we find in Isaiah 6—the linking of holiness and power—is characteristic of the entire Old Testament. Walther Eichrodt maintains that
wherever the holiness of God is encountered, “its first impact must always be that of overwhelming power” [italics mine]. Likewise A. S. Wood can simply say that, “holiness is a synonym for power.”

For example, in his song of praise immediately following Yahweh’s deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea, Moses extols the power of God: “Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy” (Exod 15:6). But he does not stop there. Extolling God’s power causes him to recognize God’s holiness: “Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders. Thou didst stretch out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them” (vv 11-12). Here we see power and holiness bound up together. In fact, in this case, the recognition of divine power leads to the recognition of divine holiness.

Likewise in 1 Samuel 6 there is a demonstration of Yahweh’s power when He slays seventy men of the village of Bethshemesh “because they looked into the ark of the Lord” (v 19). The ark had been captured by the Philistines, but was sent back to Israel because of the plagues which came upon them as a result of its presence in their midst. The men of Bethshemesh rejoiced when they saw the ark, but aroused the wrath of Yahweh by their lack of reverence for it. They experienced the terrifying power of divine judgment, which in turn, produced a recognition of divine holiness: “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?” (1 Sam 6:20) [italics mine].

Through such demonstrations of His power, through His terrible and glorious acts of judgment and redemption, Israel is brought to an awareness of Yahweh’s holiness. Although in experience power may precede holiness, in reality, as Vriezen suggests, it is a consequence of holiness. God’s holiness “implies His absolute power over the world.”

GOD’S ABSOLUTE PURITY

God’s holiness separates Him from creation, but it also separates Him from sin. Isaiah’s response to his vision of God makes this clear: “And I said: ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’ ” (v 5).

Significantly, when Isaiah responds, he does not say, “Woe is me. I am so small, so finite, and Yahweh is great, so infinite. Look how little I am and how great He is!” Although there is here a clear affirmation of the wholly otherness of God, it is not the distance between His being and God’s being which most disturbs Isaiah; rather, it is the distance between God’s character and his character. In the presence of the absolute moral purity of God, Isaiah feels like a leper.

Some have argued that the uncleanness Isaiah senses has only to do with cultic impurity. But as Engnell argues, although the cultic element should not be overlooked, neither should the ethical. Verse 7 makes it
clear that more than ceremonial impurity is involved. It is Isaiah’s “iniquity” that is taken away and his “sin” that is atoned for.

Thus the holiness of God demands both ceremonial and moral purity. The eyes of the Holy One are too pure to behold what is evil or to look upon what is wrong (Hab 1:13). Yahweh’s spotless purity, “debars and destroys everything impure.” Those who would ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in His holy place must therefore have pure hands and a clean heart; they must walk blamelessly and do what is right (Psalms 15, 24). Taken as a whole, the specific injunctions in the so-called Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26) tell us the same thing. As Eichrodt says, they make it clear that the holiness “required of the people because of the holy nature of Yahweh implies moral purity and blamelessness.”

In terms of the two movements of divine holiness discussed earlier, this facet of holiness relates most closely to the first, withdrawal and exclusion. However, unlike transcendence which involves withdrawal and separation from creation, purity involves withdrawal and separation from sin.

**GOD’S REDEEMING LOVE**

Isaiah’s desperate cry, “I am a man of unclean lips” (v 5) is answered by the declaration of the seraph, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven” (v 7). And as a result of Yahweh’s redemptive love, Isaiah’s “Woe is me!” is transformed into “Here am I! Send me.” Here then is another facet of the holiness of God: it issues in redemptive love.

Unfortunately, however, the relationship between God’s holiness and His love has often been misconstrued. Too often holiness and love have been set over against each other. As Joseph Cooke says, “Many of us have been taught that holiness and love are somehow opposed to each other—as if holiness were at one extreme of God’s nature and love at the other, and holiness would blot us out if love couldn’t find a way to prevent it.” The truth, however, is just the opposite. Rather than being opposed to divine holiness, God’s redemptive love is at the heart of it; in fact it is its supreme manifestation.

To understand why this is the case, we must only reiterate what we said earlier concerning the two movements of divine holiness. First, holiness involves withdrawal and exclusion. As the Holy One, God wills to be separate from all created things and separate from evil. But second, holiness involves expansion and inclusion. As the Holy One, God wills that all creation be filled with His glory and share in His holiness. God then wills not only to be holy; He also wills to make holy.

Sin, in turn, poses an enormous threat to the holiness of God, for it creates a barrier, both on our side and on God’s. We choose not to recognize God as the Holy One nor to share in His holiness. This in turn evokes the wrath of God, which as Brunner suggests is “the inevitable
necessary reaction of the will of God to all that opposes him.” But—and this is the crucial point—because God is holy and therefore wills to make us holy, to have us participate in His holiness and share in His glory, He must act to remove the barrier created by sin. Andrew Murray expresses this well: “It is not said, that though God is the Holy One, and hates sin, and ought to punish and destroy, that notwithstanding this He will save. By no means. But we are taught that as the Holy One, just because He is the Holy One, who delights to make holy, He will be the Deliverer of His people.”

In his discussion of divine holiness, Karl Barth makes essentially the same point. There is no doubt, he says, that the holiness of God means that God is exalted over Israel and separate from it. It means this “only because it means primarily and decisively this—that God has adopted and chosen Israel as His child, has given it His promise, and has already conferred upon it His gracious help.”

Barth then goes on to discuss the number of Old Testament passages where God’s holiness and His redemptive love are tied together, and where because of His redemptive love He is called holy. For example, Moses’s exultation, “Who is like thee, majestic in holiness” (Exod 15:11) is prompted by Yahweh’s mighty act of deliverance at the Red Sea. Hannah’s joyous affirmation, “There is none holy like the Lord” (1 Sam 2:2) follows the answer to prayers in the birth of Samuel. And the Psalmist’s declaration, “Thy way, 0 God, is holy,” (Ps 77:13) is made while remembering God’s redemptive acts on behalf of Israel. Barth concludes, “Holy means separate, that which confronts, arousing awe and the sense of obligation. But it clearly means primarily and fundamentally that which singles out, blesses, helps and restores, and only in this positive connection does it have that other significance.”

Divine holiness and divine love should therefore not be set over against each other. The two, rather, are intimately bound up with one another, so much so that God’s acts of redemptive love are the most sure and final proof that He is holy.

THE ESSENCE OF DIVINE HOLINESS

Having determined on the basis of our examination of Isaiah 6 and other Old Testament passages that the holiness of God includes five elements—transcendence, glory, power, purity, love—we are led to the conclusion that holiness is not an attribute of God which is distinct from His other attributes. His holiness is the sum of His attributes, or as Murray states, “the comprehensive summary of all His perfections.” The holiness of God represents His essential nature. It is God’s selfhood, the very Godness of God. Norman Snaith says, it stands for that which is “most intimately divine.”

That this is the case can be seen in the various places in the Old Testament where the idea of divinity in general and the idea of holiness
merge. Sometimes, for example, "God" or "Lord" and "Holy One" are a part of Hebrew parallelism (Ps 71:22; Isa 5:24; Hab 3:3). In other cases, God is directly identified as the Holy One (Isa 40:25; Hos 11:9). In several places (Ps 89:36, 108:8; Amos 4:2, 6:8) God swears by His holiness, which simply means that God swears by Himself. So close, in fact, is the linking between divinity and holiness that, as O. R. Jones remarks, just as one might coin the word "socratiness" to describe the essential character of the man Socrates, so the word "holiness" in the Old Testament functions in relation to God. It is so bound up with His essential character that there is no way to define it apart from direct reference to Him.

To say that God is holy, then, is not so much to describe Him as to emphasize that He is the one that He is; it is not so much how God is at it is who God is. Simply put, holiness is Godlikeness.

THE NATURE OF THE HOLY LIFE

Having examined the Old Testament concept of the holiness of God, we are now ready to consider some of its implications for understanding the nature of the holy life.

We have seen that the holiness of God is bound up with God's transcendence, glory, power, purity and love, and have suggested that all these facets or elements must be included if we are to arrive at a proper conception of divine holiness. If we allow our understanding of the holiness of God to shape our understanding of the holy life, we should expect that it, too, will include a number of facets or elements, each being analogous to a facet or element of the holiness of God. Thus each element of the holiness of God—transcendence, glory, power, purity, love—has a corresponding analogue in the holy life. Each of these must be given its appropriate place if we are to arrive at a proper conception of the holy life.

Based on this inclusive concept of the holiness of God, how might the holy life be described? It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt a detailed description, but here is a proposed outline:

The Holy Life is...

1. A life of separation and detachment.
2. A life of openness to the presence of God.
3. A life of power for serving God.
5. A life of love toward God and others.

Again, it must be stressed that all of these elements or facets must be included if we are to arrive at a proper conception of the holy life. No one element should be stressed in a manner which detracts from the others. Yet, as we examine the conception of the holy life found in various Christian traditions, we find a tendency to do just that. One or perhaps two of the facets of the holy life are lifted up and made determinative in defining its nature. The monastic tradition, for example, stresses separa-
tion and detachment; the mystical tradition emphasizes union with the divine presence; the nineteenth century holiness movement accentuated moral purity; twentieth-century pentecostalism gave greater priority to power. In an inclusive concept of the holy life no one facet will be exalted above the others, nor presented as the center around which the others revolve. All will receive equal importance.

In defining divine holiness we concluded that the holiness of God represents His essential nature. It is all that makes God, God. Holiness is Godlikeness. The same holds true with regard to the holy life. The holy life is the godly life. Rather than exalting one facet of the holy life to the neglect of others or making one facet the center around which the others revolve, we should identify holiness first with godliness and only then with its various facets. Godliness should become the unifying center around which the facets revolve, like spokes around the hub of a wheel.

In the light of the New Testament revelation we should also go one step further. Holiness is godliness—true, but no one has ever seen God. Jesus Christ, the only Son, who has come from God, has made Him known (John 1:18). In His face is the light of the knowledge of God’s glory (2 Cor 4:6). It is better to say that the holy life is the Christlike life. Holiness should first and foremost be identified with Jesus, who is our touchstone for defining and determining the nature of the holy life. In Him we see a living incarnation of each facet of the holy life. He is their unifying center. Holiness is Christlikeness.

By rooting our understanding of the holy life in a proper understanding of the holiness of God, we arrive at a conception of the holy life which is truly biblical, balanced, beautiful and wholistic.

Notes

4. Ibid.
6. Ibid., pp. 162-164.


16. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


24. Ibid., p. 361.

