

# What Is Holiness?

In the ancient world outside of the Bible, holiness refers to that which is “off limits” to humans. It occurs most commonly with regard to persons or objects that have been dedicated to a god or to a god’s temple. These objects or persons cannot be used for any non-religious purpose. More broadly, it refers to that which is “other.” The holy is outside the normal realms of life and has a dangerous, even frightening aura. However, there is no ethical or moral element in the concept.

This should not be surprising, since all the gods were considered “holy”—other—and some of them were good and some of them were evil; some of them clean and some of them unclean. Yet, an English dictionary defines “holy” as that which is morally excellent. Where does that come from?

## The One Who Is Truly Holy

It comes from the biblical conception of holy. For the Bible, there is only one being in the universe who is truly other, and thus holy. That is our God, Yahweh, the sole Creator, the I AM. Paganism, whether ancient or modern, is characterized by the conviction that the psycho-socio-physical cosmos is the sum total of reality. In other words, there is nothing beyond the cosmos. Furthermore, everything in this cosmos is finally of the same stuff. We today know this better than the ancients did: *Everything* consists of atomic particles. For the ancients, the realms of humanity, deity, and nature all interpenetrated each other. This is best expressed in idolatry: The sun god is represented in human form; passion is a “god” represented in a human form. However, the Bible insists that the psycho-socio-physical cosmos is not all there is to reality. Instead, it says, there is a personal being who transcends the cosmos, who is entirely *Other*. Unlike the gods of the ancient world, the God of the Bible is not part of the cosmos and thus, can neither be accessed nor manipulated through the cosmos. Thus, the Bible prohibits the making of idols.

This idea that there is only one holy being in the universe has a powerful implication: There is only one character, *His* character. Think of that: If the Creator had been cruel, voracious, and self-serving, holiness would be defined as cruelty, voraciousness, and self-service! Yet that is not what the Bible teaches. To act in “holy” ways is to act with self-denying love, with justice, with a concern for what is right for all involved, to do what is constructive and beneficial (“good”), and to be completely reliable (see Leviticus 19 in the Old Testament, and 1 Thessalonians 4—5 in the New Testament). Why does the Bible describe such behavior as “holy”? Because, thankfully, it describes the consistent character of the one Being in the universe who is holy in himself.

## Q-D-SH

In Hebrew, these ideas are expressed with words based on the three consonants *q-d-sh*.<sup>\*</sup> The adjective is *qadosh*, “holy,” while the verb “to sanctify, make holy” is *hiqdish*. Interestingly, God is never referred to as holy in Genesis, nor are people called upon to live holy lives. The reason for this is that after the fall of humanity reported in Genesis 3, God had to start much farther back to assert His radical otherness. He had to start in all over again to convince humans that He can be trusted and believed and that it is in their best interests to do what He says. Only after those things were established, as seen in Genesis 12—50, was it possible for Him to begin to reveal who He actually is. Thus, the adjective “holy” first appears in Exodus 3:5 and then again in 19:5. Both are highly significant, occurring first at the very outset of those experiences that would culminate in the giving of the covenant and the erection of the tabernacle, and then, more specifically, in the preparation for the actual presentation of the covenant.

In the first of the two instances (Exodus 3:5), Yahweh established how radically “Other” He really is. The location of the burning bush was no sanctuary. It was in a desolate place, surrounded by ordinary dirt. Yet Yahweh is so holy, so “Other,” that even dirt becomes holy by contact with Him. When Moses heard that it was their family god, the god of the fathers, who was this radically “Other” one, he did not dare to continue to look at the bush where the Holy One was. This speaks to the unique essence of God: He is the one being in the universe who is truly Other.

In Exodus 19, Yahweh carefully prepared the Hebrew people to accept a covenant relationship with Him. Everything from Genesis 4 onward had been leading to this point, for it is through this device that God would reveal: (1) His character and nature; (2) how humans are meant to live; and (3) the fact that in ourselves we are incapable of living in that way. Thus, their “yes” or “no” had almost cosmic significance. So in chapter 19, we find preparation that engages the whole person: It is cognitive (vv. 3-6), volitional (vv. 10-13), and affective (vv. 16-19). As part of the cognitive preparation, we find the statement that if the people accepted the covenant, they would become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” That is, their identity as a people would be entirely wrapped up in their relationship to God. They would be wholly dedicated to God and to serving God.

What would such dedication mean? Would it mean becoming other in their essence, as Yahweh is other? Of course not. Only God is holy in His essence. So does it mean that they are “positionally” holy—set apart for God’s use, like a vessel in the temple, without any particular implications for their character? If there were any

thought of that, it is laid to rest by the command, “You must be holy”<sup>f</sup> (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2). That is, it was up to them to actualize their holiness. What could that mean other than that they were now expected to bring to reality the potential for sharing God’s character that was inherent in their exclusive relationship with Him? A vessel in the temple could not be commanded to become holy; first, because it could not share Yahweh’s ethical character, and second, because even if it could so share, it has no capacity to choose to do so. But we humans do have the capacity to share God’s ethical character and also the ability to choose whether we will do so or not.

## The Human Problem

Here is the sticking point. As I mentioned above, the covenant had three purposes: revelation of Yahweh’s character, revelation of the character He expects of us, and revelation of our inability to live in such ways. The Israelites were entirely sincere when they swore on pain of death that they would fulfill every stipulation of the covenant. Yet, within five weeks they had made an idol (Commandment 2) and were worshiping it (Commandment 1). How can we explain such a thing?

The answer is that when they swore to keep the covenant, they did not understand the nature of the human problem. They did not recognize that (1) whatever we may say, we are unwilling to give up control of our lives; (2) we are enslaved to our desires for pleasure, possessions, and power; and (3) we are innately fearful and find it difficult to trust anyone else to meet our needs. The apostle Paul refers to these collectively as “the flesh.” As Paul says of himself in Romans 7, it was only when the Israelites began to try to keep the

covenant that they discovered to their horror that they could not. Indeed, this is what the entire rest of the Old Testament is about: The persistent failure of the people to keep the covenant, and the incredible patience and grace of Yahweh in continuing to keep His side of the covenant even though His only legal obligation was to destroy them.

What could be done? Are we commanded to be holy when we cannot be? That would be cruelty. In fact, God had a prescription for the problem. For the “temple” corrupted by sin, He sent His Son, whose sacrificial death procured cleansing for all of us. Then Christ made the Holy Spirit available to any who would in faith surrender their self-will, release their desires to God, and abandon their fears. To such persons He promises the ability to love without any concern for whether we will get it back, a mastery over desire, a confidence in His provision, a passion for justice, and a love for Him that will put all else in its proper perspective.

In short, holiness.

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\*This is typical of the Hebrew language. Words are normally formed utilizing a tri-consonantal base. The basic idea is provided by the base consonants, and specific verbs, nouns, and adjectives are created with certain prefixed and suffixed elements and with certain vowel patterns. So the Hebrew term *d-b-r* has to do with something coming to expression. Thus, *dabar* means “word” (or “thing”), while *dibbarti* means “I spoke” (or “I have spoken”).

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