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CONTENTS

Editorial iv

Articles

THEME: SIZEMORE LECTURES (27-28 Nov 2012)

SIZEMORE LECTURE I: Isaiah and Social Justice
PETER J. GENRY 1-16

SIZEMORE LECTURE II: "No One *Holy*
Like the Lord"
PETER J. GENRY 17-38

Contextualization in Missions: The Limits of
Christian Liberty
ROBIN DALE HADAWAY 39-55

The State of Islamic Textual Criticism
KIRK R. MACGREGOR 56-73

Seeing the Father in the Face of the Son
JERRY SUTTON 74-90

"The Honour of the Spirit's Work": Andrew Fuller,
Dan Taylor, and an Eighteenth-century Baptist
Debate over Regeneration
MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN 91-103

6 Things Christians Should Just Keep On Saying
RONALD V. HUGGINS 104-15

Winston Churchill: Some Agnostic! Some Atheist!
JERRY A. JOHNSON 116-30


BOOK REVIEWS

Daniel K. Finn, ed. *The Moral Dynamics of Economic
Life: An Extension and Critique of
Caritas in Veritate.*
(Reviewed by Matthew Arbo) 131-32

- Gareth L. Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.
(Reviewed by Todd R. Chipman) 132-35
- Leroy Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew*.
(Reviewed by Samuel Emadi) 135-37
- Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture*.
(Reviewed by Samuel Emadi) 138-40
- Dean B. Deppe *All Roads Lead to the Text: Eight Methods of Inquiry into the Bible*.
(Reviewed by Russell L. Meek) 140-43

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EDITORIAL:

Welcome to the Spring 2013 *Midwestern Journal of Theology*. This is the first issue to appear under our new Seminary President, Dr. Jason K. Allen. This issue features the published versions of our annual Sizemore Lectures, which were delivered in the Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Chapel on November 27-28, 2012, by Dr. Peter Gentry, Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Gentry's first lecture brings a timely message on Isaiah and Social Justice. His second discusses the concept of holiness in the Book of Isaiah. Dr. Gentry did a third lecture as well delving into questions of the Septuagint and Textual Criticism, which we look forward to publishing in a future issue.

Next on the agenda is Midwestern's own Professor of Missions, Dr. Robin Hadaway, exploring the sometimes complicated issue of exercising Christian Liberty on the mission field. Dr. Hadaway's article draws upon his extensive experience of communicating the gospel in Islamic contexts. Continuing with the theme of Islam, Dr. Kirk MacGregor contributes a very interesting article on the current state of Islamic textual criticism.

Next, Midwestern's Academic Dean, Dr. Jerry Sutton, takes us through the Gospels on the subject of what we can learn about the love of the Father by looking into the face of the Son.

Following Dr. Sutton's contribution we have Michael A. G. Haykin, Professor of Church History & Biblical Spirituality and Director of the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary investigating the eighteenth-century Baptist debate over regeneration. Dr. Haykin's study features especially the interaction between the moderate Calvinist Andrew Fuller and his Arminian Baptist counterpart, Dan Taylor.

The managing editor contributes next a small piece on six things Biblical Christians must continue to stress even though the broader culture keeps on telling them they would be better received if they did not.

Finally, Dr. Jerry A. Johnson, President of Criswell College, explores how Churchill biographer Paul Reid's personal bias against religion causes him to badly misrepresent Winston Churchill's views on the subject.

As usual we conclude with several relevant book reviews.

Good Reading!

SIZEMORE LECTURES I: Isaiah and Social Justice



PETER J. GENTRY

*Professor of Old Testament Interpretation
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, KY
pgentry@sbts.edu*

Reading and studying the Bible may not be so straightforward for readers with a *modern* and *western* background in culture and language. The biblical texts in origin are *ancient* and *eastern*: they come from a different culture and a different time.

The normal pattern in Hebrew literature is to consider topics in a recursive manner. This approach seems monotonous and repetitive to those who do not know and understand how these texts communicate. Normally a Hebrew author begins a discourse on a particular topic, develops it from a particular perspective and ends, shutting down that conversation. Next he begins another conversation, taking up the *same topic again* from a different point of view. When these two conversations or discourses on the same topic are heard in succession, they are like the left and right speakers of a stereo system. Do the speakers of a stereo system give the same music or do they give different music? The answer is *both* different *and* the same. In one sense the music from the left speaker is identical to that of the right, yet in another way it is slightly different, so that the effect is stereo instead of just one dimensional. Just so, in Hebrew literature, the ideas being discussed can be experienced like 3D IMAX photography with Dolby Surround Sound, or like considering holographic ideas.

This pattern in Hebrew literature functions both on the macro as well as on the micro level. Individual sentences are placed back to back like left and right speakers. Also paragraphs and even larger sections of texts are treated the same way. If a speaker or writer has several topics in mind

and plans to treat each one at least twice, then one can arrange them in what is called a chiasmatic fashion. For example, if I have topics A and B, and I will present each one twice, I have A and A', B and B'. However instead of using the order A B A' B', I can present them in the order A B B' A'. In this way the two topics are arranged so that the second paragraph is a mirror image of the first. This is called a chiasmatic pattern because when one looks at the Greek letter *chi* (χ), the bottom half is a perfect mirror image of the top half. A nice example is in Isaiah 6 where Yahweh explains to Isaiah what will happen during his long ministry of preaching:

Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed. (Isa. 6:10, ESV)

In the first half we have the order heart, ears, and eyes; in the second half we have the order eyes, ears, and heart: A B C :: C' B' A'. In just a moment we will see how important it is to grasp these literary patterns in the Hebrew Bible.

Few scholars today treat the book of Isaiah as a literary unity. Methods of studying the text are heavily influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment Period and focus on modern and western literary approaches instead of ancient and eastern methods of literary analysis. As a result, most of the commentaries are focused on grammatical and lexical details of individual words and phrases with the result that no larger picture of the whole book emerges from their labors.

In my approach to the text I have asked the question, "What were the Hebrews' own methods and rules for telling stories? And how did the authors of that culture and time construct their works?" Based on this approach, it is possible to discern a central theme for the book of Isaiah as a whole and to divide the book into seven separate sections where Isaiah goes around the same topic like a kaleidoscope, looking at it from different perspectives.

Barry Webb is one scholar who has taken the unity of Isaiah seriously and has argued persuasively that the book as a whole centers around the theme of corruption and social injustice in the City of Zion in the 8th century B.C. leading to divine judgment, and a vision of a future re-

newed Zion.¹ Chapter 1 details the idolatrous worldview gripping Jerusalem and the corruption in society resulting from it. The covenant made between God and Israel at Sinai and Moab describes curses and judgement for the covenant violation on the part of the people. After the judgement, however, God will remake, renew, restore, and transform Zion and Chapter 2 envisions this future Zion as a mountain dwarfing all others to which all the nations will stream to receive instruction (*tôrâ*) from Yahweh on behavior and lifestyle. Then in Chapters 3 and 4 Isaiah goes around the same topic again, indicting Jerusalem for social injustice and ending with a glorious vision of the future Zion. He depicts the road from judgment to a future City of Zion characterized by righteousness in the language of a New Exodus. Just as God brought his people out of bondage in Egypt after 430 years, so he will bring them out of their slavery to sin and chronic covenant infidelity into a new covenant community and creation. This New Exodus will be bigger and better than the first. The next section runs from Chapter 5 to 12 and begins to develop the same themes a third time in the context of a military and political crisis in Judah. Assyria, the sleeping giant, had awakened and was expanding west towards Syria and then south into Palestine. The countries of Syria with its capital in Damascus and the Northern Kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria were putting pressure on the little Kingdom of Judah in the South to join them in an anti-Assyrian coalition. The plan of King Ahaz of Judah was to become a vassal or client-king of Tiglath Pileser III of Assyria (called Pul in the Bible) and appeal to Assyria to fend off his Israelite and Aramaean enemies to the North. This section also ends by focusing on a future Messiah—a coming King—and the New Exodus, giving us a glorious vision of the new world and his rule there.

As we might expect, this third section—chapters 5–12—begins by developing further the accusations of the loss of social justice. We might also expect that by this time Isaiah’s audience would have had enough of his message. So this time, in order to make sure his audience participates, Isaiah presents his message in the form of a parable. The approach to his audience is similar to how Nathan the prophet approached King David when the Lord sent him to the King to confront him about his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah. There too, Nathan used a parable to get audience participation from the king and have David condemn himself with his own righteous anger.

¹ Barry G. Webb, “Zion in Transformation: A Literary Approach to Isaiah.” In *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* edited by D. J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter, 65-84 (JSOT Supplement Series 87. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

As we focus our attention on chapter 5, it is extremely important to observe the literary structure. Here we want to ask the question: what is the form in which this message is given to us? What is the shape of the text? This question is as important as the music that is composed to go along with the lyrics. Lyrics alone do not convey the entire message; the message is also conveyed by the music that is written for the lyrics.

Outline of Isaiah 5:1-30

- I. Song of the Vineyard 5:1-7
 - A. A Story of a Vineyard and Its Fruit 1-2
 - B. The Listeners Asked for a Verdict 3-4
 - C. The Decision of the Owner 5-6
 - D. The Application to Judah 7
- II. Bad Grapes: Indictment of God's People 5:8-24
 - A. Round # 1 (5:8-17)
 1. Woe: Land-Grabbing (8-10)
 2. Woe: Partying and Revelry (11-12)
 - a. Therefore # 1 (13)
 - b. Therefore # 2 (14-17)
 - B. Round # 2 (5:18-24)
 3. Woe: Mocking Divine Justice (18-19)
 4. Woe: Inverting God's Standards (20)
 5. Woe: Self-Approved Wisdom (21)
 6. Woe: Partying and Inverting Social Justice (22-23)
 - a. Therefore # 3 (24)

III. The Vineyard Ravaged: Announcement of Punishment (5:25-30)

A. The Final Therefore (5:25)

Chapter five is divided into three sections. The first is a parable or song about a vineyard in verses 1 – 7. The second section goes from verses 8 – 24 and applies the parable to the people of Judah and Jerusalem in Isaiah's time. The last section describes the coming judgment: God will bring a distant nation to conquer and destroy them and their way of life.

The Song of the Vineyard in the opening section can be briefly summarised. The parable is divided into four stanzas. The first stanza relates in song a story of a farmer preparing a vineyard and expecting good vintage. Instead, he is met by rotten, stunted grapes.² In the second stanza, the listeners are asked for a verdict. The third part confirms the rhetorical question posed in the second stanza by relating the decision of the owner of the vineyard. He will do exactly as the listeners expect him to do: he will destroy this useless fruit orchard. Then comes the punch line of the parable and what a great shock it is. The parable is applied to Judah and Jerusalem in the last stanza: they are the bad grapes!

Verses 8 – 24, which I have entitled “Bad Grapes,” constitute a damning indictment of the people of God. A series of six woes detail and specify the bad grapes indicated in verses 2 and 4 of the parable. The literary structure is the clue to the meaning of the text. The key words are ‘woe’ and ‘therefore’. ‘Woe’ is a key word used to describe and identify the sins for which the people will be punished. ‘Therefore’ is a key word used to detail the divine punishment for these specific sins. The punishment is based squarely upon retributive justice since this is the main principle of the Torah. Notice, however, how these woes are presented. First there are two ‘woes’ in v. 8 and v. 11 which are followed by two ‘therefores’ in verses 13 and 14. Then there are a series of four more ‘woes’ in verses 18, 20, 21, and 22 given in staccato fashion like rapid gun shots. This is followed by another ‘therefore’ in v. 24. The word therefore divides the woes into two groups: here Isaiah in typical Hebrew literary style is going around the topic twice from two different angles or points of view.

² Nogah Hareuveni explains *beushim* (bad grapes) as a specific stage of development in the growth of the grapes when they cease being embryonic but have not yet ripened. A disease called *zoteret* strikes vineyards and prevents grapes from ripening, leaving them in the stunted stage of *beushim*. This explanation is from Mishna *Ma'asrot* 1.2 and the Jerusalem Talmud. See N. Hareuveni, *Tree and Shrub in our Biblical Heritage*, 70-73.

The section indicting the people of God is then followed by an announcement of imminent punishment. This last paragraph is introduced by a conjunction which also means ‘therefore’, but the word in Hebrew is different because this is the big “therefore” (עַל־כֵּן) which takes up the three little “therefores” (כִּי) in the previous verses (13, 14, 24).

Consequently the six woes are divided into two groups: two in the first group and four in the second. At the heart of all of them is the violation of social justice as is indicated by the last line of verse 7—the punch line of the parable—where we have the word pair justice and righteousness.

Now according to the Hebrew poetry—which is based upon placing lines in parallel pairs—justice is matched in the first line by righteousness in the second. Normally in prose when the words justice and righteousness are coordinated, they form a single concept or idea: best expressed in English by the term social justice. This is a figure of speech known as a hendiadys, one concept expressed through two words. The word-pair becomes an idiom expressing a single thought that is both different and greater than just putting the two words together. Just as one cannot analyse ‘butterfly’ in English by studying ‘butter’ and ‘fly’, so one cannot determine the meaning of this expression by analysing ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’ separately. Hebrew poetry, however, allows such a word-pair to be split so that half is in one line of the couplet and half in the parallel line. The word pair justice and righteousness is central to the discourse of Isaiah and occurs some eighteen times, always at key points in the discourse.³

Just like the bible scholars and religious leaders who came to Jesus and asked him “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” so already in the Old Testament, many years earlier, as Isaiah and the other prophets sought to apply the covenant with Moses and Israel to their situation and times, they found new ways to condense and summarise in a single sentence or even phrase the apparently unwieldy mass of commands and instructions in the Torah.⁴ Even the Ten Words / Commandments upon which some six hundred or so instructions are based could be

³ Some 18 or 19 instances of the word-pair ‘justice–righteousness’, frequently split over poetic parallelism, occur in Isaiah: 1:21, 1:27, 5:07, 5:16, 9:06(7), 11:04, 16:05, 26:09, 28:17, 32:01, 32:16, 33:05, 51:05, 56:01, 58:02(2x), 59:04, 59:09, 59:14. In 11:04, 51:05 and 59:04, verbal forms of the root *šāphat* are employed instead of the noun *mišpāt*; the instance in 51:05 is not listed in the rather exhaustive and excellent study of Leclerc although it appears as valid as the instance in 11:04. See Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), esp. pp. 10-13, 88, 157.

⁴ See Matthew 22:36–40.

further condensed and summarised. An example is the famous passage in Micah 6:8, “what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

The heart of Isaiah’s message is that the covenant between God and Israel given by Moses at Sinai is broken. He summarises this covenant, consisting of the Ten Commandments and the Judgments in Exodus 20-23, using expressions or idioms for social justice and faithful loyal love, or being truthful in love. This can be described and illustrated from Isaiah’s prophecy in 16:5:

In *love* a throne will be established;
 in *faithfulness* a man will sit on it—
 one from the house of David—
 one who in judging seeks *justice*
 and speeds the cause of *righteousness*. (NIV)

In contrast to the regime of the kings of Isaiah’s time, a future king is promised who will rule in justice and righteousness. Again, like verse 7 of chapter 5, we have the word-pair split so that half is in one line of the couplet and half in the parallel line. Similarly, in the first half of the verse, we have ‘love’ (*hesed*) in the first half of the couplet and ‘faithfulness’ (*’emet*) in the second half. This is another word-pair which is focused on fulfilling one’s obligations and doing what is right in a covenant relationship (such as marriage).

Now, Isaiah’s promise of a future king in 16:5 is based upon Deuteronomy 17. Verses 16–20 of Deuteronomy 17 describe the manner in which the future king of Israel is to fulfill his responsibilities. Three negative commands in verses 16 – 17 are followed by three positive commands in verses 18 – 20—all relating to Torah: (1) the king shall copy the Torah; (2) the king shall have the Torah with him; and (3) the king shall read the Torah.⁵ In other words, the only positive requirement is that the king embodies Torah as a model citizen. This is exactly what Isaiah is saying in 16:5, only he employs the concept “social justice,” expressed by the broken word pair “justice-righteousness” as a *summary* for the Torah. Deuteronomy calls for a king who implements the Torah

⁵ I am indebted to Daniel I. Block for the privilege of consulting a preliminary version of his new commentary, *Deuteronomy*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012). Part of his research is available in Daniel I. Block, “The Burden of Leadership: The Mosaic Paradigm of Kingship (Deut. 17:14–20),” in *How I Love Your Torah, O LORD! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 118–139 (originally published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 [2005]: 259–278).

in his regime, and Isaiah predicts a king who will deliver social justice in his rule. They are saying the same thing.

We should note in passing that the word *Torah* is poorly translated by the English word ‘law’. Many Christians think of *Torah* mainly as Law, i.e. the Law of Moses. Two important facts should shape our thinking about *Torah*: first, the Hebrew word *tôrâ* means ‘direction’ or ‘instruction’, not law; second, these ‘instructions’ are given in the form of a covenant, not a law treatise. The *Torah*, then, is unlike any law code in the ancient Near East. It is a set of directions for living in the context and framework of a covenant relationship. The *Torah* is God instructing his children as a father in a family or as a husband in a marriage relationship—a relationship of faithfulness, loyalty, love, trust, and obedience. It is not a code of laws or requirements that are imposed generally upon human society by an impersonal authority. Here I use the word ‘instruction’ and ‘*Torah*’ interchangeably to try and keep these truths in focus.

The meaning of the word pair “justice-righteousness” both as an *expression* for social justice and as a *summary* of the instruction in the covenant is clearly illustrated, in particular in chapter 5, in the series of six woes divided into two separate conversations or groups. In verse 7, the word pair “justice-righteousness” broken or split over parallel lines is not only the punch-line for the parable, it is also the headline for the next section, showing that the violation of social justice is at the heart of all six woes. In the first woe the prophet thunders about land-grabbing: “Woe to those who add house to house and field to field” (5:8). The second woe (5:11) condemns the partying of the *nouveaux riches*, because the money for these parties came from mistreating the poor and vulnerable. The final four woes are all ways of elaborating the original charge of perverting social justice. The last woe is the climax and summarizes by combining the two original charges of gaining wealth by social injustice and living a life of pleasure to spend that wealth. Between the two groups of woes Isaiah announces punishments based upon the retributive justice of the covenant / *Torah*.

In the first round, as we have seen, the woe of v. 8 has to do with greedy grabbing of land while the woe of v. 11 has to do with partying and revelry. Partying and revelry occupied the leisure time of the rich and resulted from the wealth generated by mistreating the poor and vulnerable.

In the second round, the last four woes are actually a repetition of the first two in recursive development of the topic. The third woe talks about the upper classes carrying a burden of sin bound by big ropes of deceit and mocking God by calling upon him to hurry up with the judgment which he has promised. The fourth woe shows that the system of virtue and vice, of right and wrong, is completely inverted in this society. The

fifth woe accuses the people of depending on self-approved knowledge and skill. They are confident in and relying on their technology and mastery of the powers of nature. I remember well when we first heard of AIDS around 1979. In the early 1980s, the attitude in North America was, just give us enough time and a better technology and we will beat this—an example of relying on our own technology.

The woes, then, are all ways of elaborating the original charge of perverting social justice. The last woe is the climax and summarizes by combining the two original charges of gaining wealth by social injustice and living a life of pleasure to spend that wealth. In this way the last four woes elaborate the original two indictments. These indictments and the punishments that result are based entirely upon the retributive justice of the Torah, the Covenant made at Sinai. The penalty always matches exactly the crime. The wrong-doer must repay as much as but no more than the wrong done.

The economic and social situation addressed by Isaiah in Chapter 5 signals the breakdown of conventions governing ownership of property.⁶ Prior to the monarchic period, Israelite economy was based on farming and shepherding. Property was inherited and preserved within **clans**—a kin group between the extended family and the tribe. Diverse instructions in the Mosaic Covenant were given to preserve economic equilibrium in ownership of property and protect the poor and powerless, e.g. laws concerning boundary markers,⁷ the inheritance rights of females,⁸ levirate marriage,⁹ *gō'ēl* responsibilities,¹⁰ and jubilee / sabbatical years.¹¹ Two factors brought changes to this social system: monarchy and urbanization. With the advent of kingship, land could be acquired by the crown: sometimes corruptly as in the case of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) and sometimes legally through the confiscation of the estates of criminals and traitors. Thus, a family inheritance could be enlarged by a royal grant. Samuel warned about this in 1 Sam 8:14-15. Recipients of such royal largesse would live in the capital city and eat every day at the king's table, all the while enjoying the revenue of their amassed holdings. In this way, important nobles and officials, especially those who in-

⁶ This description of the background to the social situation in Isaiah 5 is adapted from and based upon Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 59-60, who brings together many seminal studies on the topic.

⁷ Deut. 19:14, 27:17.

⁸ Num. 26:33, 27:1-11, 36:1-13.

⁹ Deut. 25:5-10, Ruth 4:5, 10.

¹⁰ Redemption of property (Lev. 25:23-28), of persons (25:47-55), of blood (Num. 35), levirate marriage (Ruth 4:5, 10) by the nearest relative.

¹¹ Leviticus 25.

gratiated themselves to the king and his henchmen, were in a position to acquire by legal and illegal means the property of those vulnerable to oppression.

On the other hand, the development and growth of cities created new ties between peasant farmers and a new class of merchants who usually lived in the towns and influenced public affairs. When a farmer suffered economic setbacks from crop failure due to drought or locusts, for example, he would turn to a merchant or moneylender in town. He would either be charged interest for a loan or be forced to cultivate land belonging to others on a share-cropping or tenant basis. We have documents from the Jewish community in Elephantine (Aswan), Egypt from the fifth-century B.C. that mention Jews who had to pay interest rates of 5 percent per month. When unpaid interest is added to the capital, the average annual rate is sixty percent.¹²

As agricultural plots become the property of a single owner (perhaps an absentee landlord who is a city dweller), as peasants become indentured serfs or even slaves, and as their goods and services are received as payments on loans, the gap between the rich and poor widens. Since land ownership translates into economic and political power, issues of property rights and taxes, as well as laws concerning bankruptcy, foreclosures and loans, fall into the hands of the rich, thus aiding and abetting a gap in power as well.

The situation which Isaiah condemns is graphically portrayed: large estates amassed by adding field to field on which sit “large and beautiful homes” (5:9b). The acquisition of land comes as debts are foreclosed and the property is expropriated. Since all of this is done according to the laws of the marketplace and by statute, it is all strictly legal—but utterly immoral and violates the social justice of the Torah. This is a powerful demonstration of the parable of the vineyard at work: everything looks legal and proper on the outside, but on closer inspection shows that the grapes are rotten, stinking and stunted. The image of a landowner dwelling all alone in the midst of the country is a picture of great horror. While American society idolizes and praises rugged individualism, ancient Israel valued the community over the individual. The interests of the group were more important than those of a single individual, no matter how clever or skilled and talented the entrepreneur. It is difficult, therefore, for us to feel the horror of ending up as a society of one.

And so the rich and luxuriant lifestyle of the upper class grows even as the poor get poorer. The punishment therefore fits the crime: the fine homes will become desolate and uninhabited (5:9), and the fields so rav-

¹² If one considers compounded (or unpaid) interest, the rate would be higher.

enously acquired will be blighted (5:10). The same retribution is expressed in v. 17 when the prophet goes round the topic a second time.

The second woe describes the lifestyle of the growing upper class. The accumulated wealth frees the gentry, landowners, from the necessity of working and allows them to enjoy a carefree and self-indulgent life. After the property and fine homes, the most conspicuous sign of this detached and carefree life is feasting and drinking—drinking literally from morning to night—is twice decried (5:11, 22). Their fine feasts are accompanied by small orchestras—lyre and lute, tambourine and flute. Again, the punishment is directly matched to the offense. V. 13 says, “their nobility are poor wretches famished with hunger and their multitude are parched with thirst.”

The chapter ends without a shred of hope. In the last paragraph, God whistles to summon a distant nation who then brings a war machine across the desert that is so disciplined and powerful that there will be no escape. It reminds one of the troops of Sauron at the Gates of Mordor in *Lord of the Rings*.

The literary structure is key to correct interpretation. The last four woes and following ‘therefore’ are an expansion upon the first two woes and the two climactic ‘therefores’ that follow them. The literary structure, then, shows that vv. 15-16 are both climactic and central as summaries of the condition of Israel and her situation before God:

So humanity is humbled and mankind is brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty will be brought low,
but the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.¹³

Although the elite in Israel are enjoying the high life, they will be brought low and brought to recognize one who is truly exalted and high: Yahweh of Armies. He is exalted because he shows himself holy in justice and righteousness. The word-pair for social justice split over parallel lines is found once more at this crucial juncture in the text, just as it was found in v. 7, the punch-line of the parable.

What does it mean for God to show himself holy in justice and righteousness? This is the topic for Part II and so we end on a cliff-hanger.

Nonetheless, we need to apply this teaching on social justice. There is a debate among Christians today about how the message of social justice relates to the gospel. Is social justice at the heart of the gospel message or is it related to it in some secondary way?

¹³ Translation that of H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 1:356-357.

Three important perspectives will give us balance in our thinking on this topic. First, I am using the term social justice in a different way from the way it is commonly used in America. A renowned professor of Ethics wrote an article recently published in *Time Magazine*.¹⁴ He described how divided America has become and how this is especially seen in the recent election (2012). Americans are divided on how they define ‘fair’ and ‘just’. For some Americans, ‘fair’ means proportionality, which means that people are getting benefits in proportion to their contributions. For others fairness means equality: everyone gets the same. The third major definition of fairness is procedural fairness, which means that honest, open and impartial rules are used to determine who gets what. People and politicians in America, then, use the term social justice today in a wide variety of ways.

What we can see in the Bible, and in particular in Isaiah, is that God is bound to the nation of Israel by a covenant relationship. This covenant, made at Sinai, shows the people how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in genuinely human ways, and how to be good stewards of the earth’s resources.¹⁵ Social justice is a term used by Isaiah and other prophets as a way of summarizing all the diverse instructions in the covenant. So here, the term social justice is defined by the detailed instructions in the covenant for treating other people in a genuinely human way.

Israel was a nation in covenant relationship with God and governed directly by God through her king, her prophets and her priests. America is not a Christian state in any sense of the word. This text in Isaiah does not apply directly to our state or our nation; it applies directly, first and foremost to the Church as the people of God. As we consider the heritage of America, however, we would hope for social justice in our country. Nonetheless, there are signs of the same corruption in our society even in Louisville.¹⁶ Recently I visited jails, the Main Jail in the City of Louisville and the Luther Luckett Correctional Facility out in La Grange. The room for visitors to the downtown jail holds about forty chairs. The day I was there I counted four men and the rest were women and children. All but one or two were from the lowest class of society. Is this because the rich in Louisville are not guilty of the same offenses? Hardly! One of-

¹⁴ Jonathan Haidt, “Romney, Obama and the New Culture War over Fairness,” *Time Magazine* October 8, 2012.

¹⁵ See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), *passim*.

¹⁶ I can only speak knowledgeably about the city where I live.

fense is drunk driving.¹⁷ Surely, if a person drives a car under the influence of alcohol, this is tantamount to murder. One is almost certain to have an accident which results in the deaths of innocent people. Yet if a person gets a DUI in Louisville and they are wealthy or well-connected, they may have their license taken away for thirty days and a fine of \$100.00. Yet if they are from the lower classes, or have no connections with powerful lawyers, they may have their license suspended for up to a year and pay a fine of \$700.00. Are we really implementing justice or are we using laws to oppress the powerless? Another example is when our businesses target young people for credit cards and educational loans. Then we develop laws on interest payments, credit ratings, bankruptcy and foreclosure that enslave them. Mortgage rates are dropping again. Yet even at 5% a person who borrows \$115,000.00 will end up paying \$250,000.00 over a period of 30 years. Is it really the right of one individual to treat others in the society this way? Finally, an example from the health industry. Recently I had back problems while residing in Germany. I had to pay up front for an MRI and the cost was \$950.00 (US Dollars). A year later, I had another MRI done in Louisville. The cost was \$3,500.00 but the Explanation of Benefits Statement showed that in the end, the medical people only received \$950.00 from the insurance company. This means that the medical people know that they will be docked by the insurance people and charge accordingly so they will end up with the cost of their labors. Fair enough! But this penalizes the poor in society who have to pay \$3,500.00 for the procedure.

Second, social justice is also at the heart of the new covenant. We can say that Christians are people who are bound to God by faith in Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection have inaugurated a new covenant. Those bound to God by faith in Jesus Christ belong to the new covenant community. Our relationship to God is not based on the Old Covenant made at Sinai, but rather on the New Covenant made at the cross. Nonetheless, the righteousness of God has not changed. Loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves has been replaced by loving Jesus and loving others, those in the new covenant community and those outside in the world in general. Earlier we saw from Isaiah 16:5 that the prophets attempted to express this in a single sound bite. One expression was “justice and righteousness” and another was “faithfulness and love.” In the book titled *Kingdom Through Covenant* by myself and S. J. Wellum there is an entire chapter on Ephesians 4:15 where I show that when Paul calls believers in Jesus Christ to act truthfully in love or speak the truth

¹⁷ In 2010, about 75 people were killed on the highways of the city of Toronto and 1000 in the entire state of Kentucky. There are also more people in Toronto than in the entire state of Kentucky. A high percentage of deaths on the road in Kentucky are due to drunk driving.

in love, he is showing that social justice is at the centre, the heart of the new covenant just as it was in the Old.¹⁸



The claim that social justice sums up the requirements of the stipulations for the new creation / new covenant community must be considered in context. These instructions are given to a people who are already justified and forgiven so that they may know how to live and treat each other in a community which models for the rest of the world life in the new creation. In Eph 1:13-14, Paul equates “the word of truth” with “the gospel of your salvation.” Nonetheless, the gospel that Paul preached included justification, daily growth in holiness both individually and in relationships in the covenant community, and final redemption. Thus there is no conflict between “speaking the truth” as social justice and “the word of truth” in terms of believing the gospel and being saved. In addition, since the character and righteousness of God expressed in the old covenant is not different from that expressed in the new covenant—although doubtless brought to fuller light and greater fullness in the new covenant—there is continuity between the social justice we see in the Old Testament and the teaching of Paul in the New.

¹⁸ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

Third, and this final point flows out of the fact that social justice is an expression for summing up how to behave in both the Old and New Covenant communities, social justice is at the heart of who God is. The central statement of Isaiah Chapter 5—according to the literary structure—is verse 16:

but the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness

This verse is telling us that God wants social justice in the way we treat each other because this is who he is in himself. This is possible, as the New Testament shows, because God is a triune being—three persons in one. How can you have social justice or faithful loyal love unless there is more than one person?

For a long time in the western world, there has been a tendency to treat the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a problem rather than as encapsulating the heart of the Christian Gospel. A recent writer put it this way: “It is as if one had to establish one’s Christian orthodoxy by facing a series of mathematical and logical difficulties rather than by glorying in the being of a God whose reality as a communion of persons is the basis of a rational universe in which personal life may take shape.”¹⁹ Do you see the situation? Our problems arise because we come to this teaching with our ideas of god, human life and personality. And then we say this teaching is illogical or puzzling. What we need to do is to start the other way round. It is only if and when we **begin** with this teaching that we can understand God and ourselves and the world in which we live. Let me illustrate. Only the Christian God explains communication, love, and social justice. For a moment we’ll talk about this in a human family. How can a child understand love or social justice if the definition of this is based entirely and totally upon the relationship of the child to the parent and the parent to the child. This is a very insecure and unstable basis for love, because the child knows that he or she may disappoint or fail father or mother. And when that happens, the love is imperfect. If, however, love is defined in a relationship outside the child-parent relationship, in the love of husband and wife, then the child knows that world of love won’t fall apart when they disobey dad or mom. There is a secure foundation for love because love is defined in a relationship outside of the child-parent relationship. The same is true of our relation to God. If faithful love or social justice depends on our relationship to God, then this love or justice is not perfect. But faithful love and social justice is

¹⁹ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 31-32.

found within the being of God. Because there are personal distinctions within God himself, the eternal love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, we have a basis for love and social justice. The Muslim has 99 names for God, but love is not one of them. Only the Christian faith has a basis for love in human relationships because love is based in God himself independently of our relation to him.



**Two LXX enthusiasts: Southern's Dr. Peter Gentry and
Midwestern's Dr. Radu Gheorghita**

SIZEMORE LECTURES II: “No One *Holy* Like the Lord”



PETER J. GENTRY

*Professor of Old Testament Interpretation
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, KY
pgentry@smts.edu*

“No one holy like Yahweh” is Hannah’s bold praise when God granted her request for a child (1 Sam 2:2). Hannah’s praise is based not only on her own experience, but also on the revelation given at the Exodus. Moses’ Song at the Sea rang out, “Who is like you among the gods, Yahweh? Who is like you—majestic in holiness!” (Exod 15:11). As we shall see, the revelation of God as holy and the creation of a covenant people who are holy are connected specifically with the events of the Exodus. ‘Saint’ is, in fact, an *Exodus* word and indeed Paul’s use in the New Testament is in view of the work of Jesus Christ as bringing about a new Exodus.¹

Unfortunately, the church of Jesus Christ, at least in the western world, has not understood very well the meaning of the word holy, nor what it means to worship a holy God. We can quickly survey our systematic theologians from the Reformation to the present time. Richard Muller, describing the Reformed orthodox doctrine of the divine holiness notes that:

holiness, has, moreover, two implications, both of which are typically stated in relation or in contrast to creatures. First, it can indicate the absolute “moral purity” of God and stand, therefore, in relation to his justice or righteousness. ... Second, “the word

¹ The connection between the term “holy” and the events of the Exodus will be explored in the calling of Moses in Exodus 3 and the calling of Israel in Exodus 19.

is also employed to denote God's infinite excellence above all that is low and created."²

Thus holiness is roughly equivalent to 'purity' and 'transcendence'. Herman Bavinck builds on this tradition. He states, "the stem $\Psi\text{דק}$, related to $\Psi\text{דן}$, is usually traced to the root דק , meaning "to cut, separate."³ He claims that the "sanctification of persons and things by the Lord occurs in two ways: negatively, by choosing a people, person, place, day, or object and setting it apart from all others; and positively, by consecrating these persons or things and causing them to live in accordance with specific rules."⁴ When applied to God, he denies that Yahweh is called holy "because of an immediately conspicuous attribute," but rather "in a comprehensive sense in connection with every revelation that impresses humans with his deity."⁵

Bavinck's derivation of the root $\Psi\text{דק}$ is based upon the work of W. W. Baudissin, "Der Begriff der Heiligkeit im AT," published in 1878.⁶ Baudissin influenced more than a century of ecclesiastical thought, for recent systematic theologians continue to rely on the etymology adduced by him.

For example, J. R. Williams in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* edited by Walter A. Elwell states, "Holiness then denotes the separateness, or otherness, of God from all his creation. The Hebrew word for holy, *qādōš*, in its fundamental meaning contains the note of that which is separate or apart."⁷ Millard Erickson, in his *Christian Theology*, states, "the Hebrew word for 'holy' ($\Psi\text{דק}$ —*qadosh*) means 'marked off' or 'withdrawn from common, ordinary use.' The verb from which it is derived suggests 'to cut off' or 'to separate.'"⁸ Although John Frame's enormous work *The Doctrine of God* does not really discuss the divine

² Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*. Volume 3: *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 499.

³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*. Volume 2: *God and Creation* edited by John Bolt and translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 217.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁶ W. W. Baudissin, "Der Begriff der Heiligkeit im AT," *Studien zur semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, II (Leipzig: F. W. Grunow, 1878).

⁷ J. R. Williams, "Holiness," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 515.

⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 1:284.

attributes,⁹ I had the opportunity to ask him in person when he visited Southern Seminary a few years ago. He responded by affirming that the basic meaning of the word was “separate.”

Not only is this etymology entirely uncertain,¹⁰ but Christian scholars, whether biblical exegetes or systematic theologians, have been warned for over half a century of the dangers of etymological approaches to semantics. As an example, “nice” in English comes from the Latin word *nescius*, meaning ignorant. Thus the history or origin of a word may be interesting, but totally irrelevant for determining its meaning.

John S. Feinberg, in his massive work, *No One Like Him*, says that the main verb *qādaš* “means to be holy or sanctified and to consecrate or sanctify.”¹¹ For the related noun *qōdeš* he gives “apartness,” “holiness,” and “sacredness” as equivalents.¹² He avers that Scripture offers a two-fold picture of divine holiness: one is majesty and the other is moral purity and perfection.¹³ Feinberg avoids the dangers of etymologically based lexical study, but does not substantially advance discussion beyond the reformers, and especially the magisterial treatment of Stephen Charnock’s *The Existence and Attributes of God* who devotes a hundred pages to the holiness of God. Charnock’s focus, in sum, is also upon the majesty and moral excellence and purity of God.¹⁴

Charles Hodge teaches that holiness “is a general term for the moral excellence of God.”¹⁵ He explains: “to sanctify is to cleanse; to be holy is to be clean.”¹⁶ Furthermore, God’s infinite purity is the object of reverence. “Hence the Hebrew word *שׁוֹדֵף*, as used in Scripture, is often equivalent to *venerandus*.”¹⁷

⁹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

¹⁰ McComiskey states, “The suggestion that the root *qdsh* is derived from an original biliteral *qd* (“cut”) is attractive but tenuous... The meaning “to separate” is favored by many scholars, but the fact that *qdsh* rarely, if ever, occurs in a secular sense makes any positive conclusion in this regard difficult because of the limited evidence on which to base philological comparison.” See T. E. McComiskey, “*שׁוֹדֵף* (*qādash*)” *TWOT* II:786-7.

¹¹ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him. Foundations of Evangelical Theology: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 339.

¹² *Ibid.*, 340.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 340-45.

¹⁴ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1853, 1996), 108-208.

¹⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (3 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 [orig. 1870]), 1:413.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Rudolf Otto, in a major work entitled *The Idea of the Holy* opposes the sense of moral purity. He avers, “When once it has been grasped that *qādōsh* or *sanctus* is not originally a moral category at all, the most obvious rendering of the words is ‘transcendent’ (‘supramundane’, *überweltlich*)” [italics his].¹⁸ He is right when he says holy is not a moral category, but wrong in affirming the meaning transcendent.

As we will see from careful exegesis of scripture, neither “moral purity” nor “transcendence” are fundamental to the meaning of holy either in Greek or in Hebrew. The best approach to semantic analysis is an exhaustive study of all available usage, not only for the literature in question, but also for contemporary documents in the cultures surrounding the original texts of the Bible. This kind of study was performed already in 1986 by a French evangelical, Claude Bernard Costecalde.¹⁹ Costecalde analysed the respective terms in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Northwest Semitic Inscriptions in addition to the usage in the Hebrew Bible. His exhaustive research was so well recognised by scholars that he was invited to contribute the article on holiness in the famous Catholic Dictionary known as *Suppléments aux Dictionnaire de la Bible*.²⁰ Although it was published a quarter of a century ago, this research has not penetrated the church in North America, probably because Costecalde’s work is in French. My own exegesis over the last twenty-five years has been greatly stimulated by the work of Costecalde. Thus I am presenting his work as well as my own.

The meaning of the word holy can be expounded by focusing largely on three texts: Exodus 3, Exodus 19, and Isaiah 6.

EXODUS 3 – HOLY GROUND

Noteworthy is the passage in Exodus 3 where Moses encounters Yahweh in the burning bush and is asked to remove his sandals because he is standing on “holy ground.” This is the first instance in the Old Testament of the root *qdš* in either an adjectival or noun form. Indeed, only one instance of the related verb is found prior to this text (Genesis 2:3), so Exodus 3 is foundational to our thinking about the word. As Costecalde observes, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not called by them a “Holy God” nor was he worshipped by them at a holy place. God waited until he called Moses and revealed himself to him to announce to

¹⁸ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 52.

¹⁹ Claude Bernard Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique* (Paris : Letouzey & Ané, 1986).

²⁰ Claude Bernard Costecalde, “*Sacré*” in *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Supplément 10 (Paris : Letouzey & Ané, 1985), col. 1346-1415.

this shepherd that “the mountain of God” is a holy place: *'admat qodeš*, normally translated “holy ground” (cf. EVV).

Why does God designate the mountain as a *qodeš* place? One reason generally given is as follows: the “holiness” of the place is a barrier which prevented Moses, and later the people, from approaching. The mountain is “taboo” or “a forbidden place.” The presence of God as “the totally other” upon the mountain makes the place inaccessible and provokes fear in Moses because of the “holy” character of the mountain.

Muilenburg, for example, in the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* expresses this view. He states:

The consciousness of the radical cleavage between the human and the divine is rooted in *taboo*, and is illustrated in the law of the *hérem* (הֶרֶם), in which man is forbidden to appropriate what belongs to God, and in the frequent prohibitions against profanation. The holy is unapproachable; man must not “come near” (קָרַב) to it. Thus Moses must not come near, for the place on which he stands is קֹדֶשׁ (Exod. 3:5 J; cf. Josh. 5:15).²¹

This explanation does not account for all the facts given in the text. God does not forbid Moses from approaching the holy ground but only from coming near the bush—the place from which he speaks. The ground designated as holy includes the precise place where Moses stands, not just the bush where Yahweh speaks. In the narrative of Exodus 3:1-6 Moses is given two distinct and separate commands: (1) “Don’t come near here!” and (2) “Remove your sandals because the place where you are standing is holy ground.”²² The holy ground, then, is much larger than the bush where Yahweh speaks. It follows that the command which forbids him to approach does not apply to the ground declared “holy,” but only to the precise spot where Yahweh speaks. The causal clause informing Moses that he is standing on holy ground is the reason for removing his sandals and is not connected to the command to stay away from the bush.

The “holy ground” (3:5), then, encompasses a larger space than just the bush from which God speaks and is, in fact, equivalent to the area designated as “the mountain of God” in Exod 3:1. Moses is standing upon a *qdš* place; there is nothing inaccessible or restricted about approaching there. The mountain of God is not ‘taboo’ or a ‘forbidden place.’ Moreover, it does not inspire fear any more than the bush, which

²¹ J. Muilenburg, “Holiness,” *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 2:618.

²² The sentences are asyndetic rather than connected by *waw*.

rather provokes curiosity. The fear which seizes Moses in the narrative does not spring from the “sacrosanct” character of the mountain; it is provoked by the shock of the vision of God. This unexpected meeting with God seizes him with fright. Verse six shows clearly the difference between fear and holy, because the fear is not inspired by the holy mountain, but only by the vision of God. It is therefore improper to speak of “holy fear” if our language is to be genuinely true to Scripture.

As already noted, “holy ground” appears as a synonym of the “mountain of God.” From the culture of that time there is nothing astonishing about this because we know already in the 14th century before Jesus Christ at Ugarit that Baal dwells on a mountain and that “the mountain of Baal” is also called a place *qdš*.²³ By contrast, however, the mountain in Exodus 3:1 is called “*qdš*” because of the presence of God upon it and not because of a holy character inherent or proper to the place where Moses stands. In the course of Moses’ vision, it is not so much the place as such which is valued, but the presence of God upon it. This is when it becomes remarkable: the mountain is *qdš* because it is the mountain of God.

We can recognize then, in Exodus 3, a meaning of a derivative of the root *qdš* current in the 14th century before Jesus Christ, where the *qdš* ground is not the place of distance or radical separation, but of meeting and of presence, the meeting of God and man. In standing on the ground which belongs to God, Moses is not called *qādōš*, but to be allowed to walk there he must submit to the practice of a rite or ritual: remove his sandals. Is this an innovation? Undoubtedly not. The act of removing one’s sandals, like the act of the nearest relative in Deut 25:9 or Ruth 4:7, is a ceremony or rite of de-possession well-known in the culture of that time. The *gō’ēl*, i.e. nearest relative, removes his sandal to show that he is relinquishing his rights of purchase. Thus Moses must acknowledge that this ground belongs to God and enter into an attitude of consecration. Rather than marking an item as set apart, then, ‘holy’ ground is ground consecrated, devoted or prepared for the meeting of God and man.

In speaking from the middle of the bush, God manifests his desire to be present in the midst of men. But he presents himself progressively. First of all to Moses, who would not dare to look at him and who is surprised at the time and seized with fear. It is God, in the text, who takes the initiative in meeting men; he is the one who declares the mountain to be ground *qdš*. It is not man who decides to meet the God of the patri-

²³ See G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (Handbook of Oriental Studies 67; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 695 where *qdš* is attributed to the citadel of Baal = “the mountain of Baal” in KTU 1.16.I:7, 1.16.II:46.

archs, it is not he who consecrates to this invisible God a particular place. The narrator insists on the divine initiative. It seems that the most suitable translation of *qdš* in Exod 3 must be something like “consecrated” or “devoted ground”. God has chosen the place of the meeting; he waits for Moses, and after having “prepared the ground” he presents himself to the shepherd and makes him part of his project of salvation.

EXODUS 19 – HOLY NATION

In Exodus 19 we come to the next stage in God’s progressive revelation and also in the extension of holiness. Israel has come out of Egypt and is now camped before the mountain in the desert of Sinai. In the narrative of this episode, the Lord speaks to Moses and commands him to “consecrate” the people in verse 10. In verse 14, Moses obeys: he comes down the mountain where he has met God and received this communication from him and “consecrates” the people. In fact, five forms of the root *qdš* are found in Exodus 19 (19:6, 10, 14, 22, 23) making this an important development from Exodus 3.

Several different translations of the verb *qaddēš* have been proposed: sanctify (TOB), cause to sanctify oneself (New Jerusalem Bible 1973), consecrate (É. Dhorme²⁴), cause to be holy (M. Gilbert²⁵), and declare holy (F.-J. Leenhardt²⁶). We can agree here with the position of Gilbert against that of Leenhardt. Since the form is in the Piel stem, the meaning is essentially Intensive-Factitive.²⁷ This has to do with the causation or bringing about of a state: Moses brings the people to a consecrated or holy status.

At this point the notion of “sanctification” is overcharged with a moral sense in many expositions. Such a meaning cannot be justified by reason of the context. In other respects, the translation “sanctify” the people, the priests, or the mountain, does not help to understand the

²⁴ E. Dhorme, *L'Évolution Religieuse d'Israël*. Vol. 1 *La Religion des Hébreux Nomades* (Brussels: Nouvelle Société d'Éditions, 1937), 309.

²⁵ Maurice Gilbert, “Le Sacré dans l’Ancien Testament,” in *L’Expression du Sacré dans les Grandes Religions* (ed. Julien Ries, Herbert Sauren et al.; Louvain-la-Neuve, 1983), 1:210-211.

²⁶ Franz-J. Leenhardt, *La Notion de Sainteté dans l’Ancien Testament* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1929), 44.

²⁷ See E. Jenni, *Das hebräische Pi’el: Syntaktisch-semasiologische Untersuchung einer Verbalform im Alten Testament* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968), and idem “Aktionsarten und Stammformen im Althebräischen: Das Pi’el in verbesserter Sicht,” *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 13/1 (2000): 67-90 and Bruce K. Waltke, and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

sense of the command given by God to Moses. The notion of consecration—more neutral in the first place—is more suitable.

What does God desire? He wants to get ready or prepare a meeting with the people of Israel under certain conditions. He presents himself first to Moses in a spectacular manner. Before receiving the divine call, Moses must accomplish a rite. Now in Exodus 19, it is Moses who plays the role of intermediary between God and the people. Likewise, in 19:23, Moses receives the order to consecrate (*qaddēš* Piel) the mountain which has been “delimited” or “marked off.”

Gilbert believes that “the notion of the holy” in verses 22-23 “is closer to the idea of taboo than that which appears in Ex 19:2-13.”²⁸ The verb *qaddēš*, however, in relation to the mountain is in the same stem as in verses 10-14 where it is used in relation to the people. It is difficult to discover a semantic difference between two identical uses of the verb. Furthermore, if one examines the context, one notes that the “ban / interdiction / prohibition” (or the taboo) is not equivalent to consecration: “a consecrated mountain” is not “a forbidden mountain.” It is because the mountain is consecrated that its access is forbidden to the people. The interdiction is a consequence or result of the consecration, it does not define consecration itself. Consecrating the mountain is preparing this place for the coming of God. To do this, Moses must place boundaries there and order the people not to approach it.

Unlike Exodus 3 where God orders the fulfilment of a ritual on a consecrated place, here in Exodus 19 it is Moses who “consecrates” the people (19:10). Thus there is in this text a progression in comparison with the passage in Exodus 3. Moses is no longer a witness of consecration; he actively participates in this consecration. He does not just touch consecrated ground; he consecrates the people in the one case, and the delimited mountain in the other.

The meaning of this consecration is defined by the context. In Exodus 3, the “consecrated mountain” appears as a place *prepared*, having become for a time a divine possession. Here, a consecrated people are a people ready to meet God. Verse 11 states, “that they may be ready for the third day” (Exod 19:11). The consecration of the people is a preparation. For Moses—who is clearly the subject of the verb *qaddēš*—consecrating the people is “to put them in a state to approach God” according to G. Auzou.²⁹ This preparation is effected by the practice of a

²⁸ Maurice Gilbert, “Le Sacré dans l’Ancien Testament,” in *L’Expression du Sacré dans les Grandes Religions* edited by Julien Ries, Herbert Sauren et al. (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1983), 1:263.

²⁹ Georges Auzou, *De La Servitude au Service: Étude du Livre de L’Exode* (Paris: Éditions de l’Orante, 1961), 254. Auzou’s words in the original are as

ritual: washing the cloaks, which takes two days (vv. 10-11 and 15). According to the sequence of volitives the washing follows the consecration and appears as a result. An element of purification is certainly present in this text, but one cannot equate consecration and purification in strict terms and the word קָדַשׁ is not used.

Are the people consecrated in the same manner as the consecrated mountain (*qōdeš*)? A consecrated people—are they a people who belong to God? It seems that the context confirms this, likewise that the element of preparation predominates. Moses must declare to the people: “Be ready in three days. Don’t come near your wives” (verse 15). This order is certainly given for a precise reason. In “not coming near” their wives the Israelites are ready “to come near” God. God wants to prepare the people for a very special meeting. Certainly, Moses is not establishing a taboo; the text does not say that to have sexual relations with your wife is to move away from God. But God desires, for a special occasion, a special consecration. This abstinence is found in 1 Sam 21:5 and in the history of religions.

One discovers in fact the idea of belonging and devotion connected to the notion of consecration at the beginning of Chapter 19 where verses 5-6 affirm clearly the purpose of God, less evident perhaps in verses 10-15 and 22-24: “You will be my personal treasure (*sglh*, Amorite term) among all the peoples—since all the earth belongs to me—and you will be for me a royal priesthood and a holy nation.” Without rehearsing here the details and exegetical issues fully treated in a monograph entitled *Kingdom Through Covenant*, priests are persons devoted solely to the service of the deity.³⁰ Israel as a nation *qadōš* is a nation given access to the presence of Yahweh and devoted solely to the service and worship of the Lord. Moreover the statements in verses 5 and 6 are double. First, the call to be a holy nation is parallel to the call to be a royal priesthood, and second, the two designations “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” together constitute an explanation of what it means to be Yahweh’s personal treasure. The idea of belonging and that of consecration are closely related in these verses; they are also in the verses which follow.

A holy nation, then, is one prepared and consecrated for fellowship with God and one completely devoted to him. Instruction (תּוֹרָה) in the Covenant is often supported by the statement from Yahweh, “for I am holy.” Such statements show that complete devotion to God on the part of Israel would show itself in two ways: (1) identifying with his ethics and morality, and (2) sharing his concern for the broken in the commu-

follows: “«Sanctifier» ou «consacrer», v. 10, c’est mettre en état d’approcher Dieu.”

³⁰ Peter J. Gentry and Steven Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

nity. The commands and instructions in Leviticus 19 and 20 are bounded by the claim that Yahweh is holy (19:2, 20:26) and include concern against mistreating the alien and the poor, the blind and the deaf. In the ‘Judgments’ of the Book of the Covenant, some instructions relate to the oppression of orphans and widows (Exod 22:23). God was concerned about the rights of the slave (e.g. Exod 21:2-11) and the disenfranchised in society. Over the past forty years we have heard the strident voice of the feminist, of the anti-nuclear protest, and of the gay rights movement. But God hears the voice of those who are broken in body, in economy, and in spirit. If we are in covenant relationship with Him, we must, like Him, hear the voice that is too weak to cry out.

In consequence of our study of Exodus 19, we cannot speak of “separation” as some like F.-J. Leenhardt³¹ and F. Michaeli³² do, or of an impassable gulf as A. Lefevre does, for whom “holiness is the impassable gulf which makes God inaccessible to the creature.”³³ Such meanings are not appropriate to the use of forms of *qdš* in this text.

The ban on going up on the mountain does not imply a separation between the people and the mountain. On the contrary, the people are invited to participate in the theophany, not simply as spectators, but as consecrated: the place **and** the people are ready to receive God because they belong to him. If Moses must fix the impassable limits—as God himself must do for Moses at the time of the burning bush—this is not to establish a radical separation between the people and God, but to indicate the distance which further remains between the people and God and to protect in a certain manner, the Israelites. There is a gradation: the people are consecrated; they may approach and see, but only Moses and several privileged ones may be enveloped by the cloud. So then, the greater the consecration, the greater is the distance noticeably diminished: consecration appears correctly, in Exodus 19 as the opposite of separation.

In notes to Exodus 19:9-25 in the *HCSB Study Bible*, Coover-Cox observes that the covenant-making at Sinai is compared to a suzerain-vassal treaty in the Ancient Near East. He states:

The preparations for a meeting between the LORD and the Israelites continue the extended metaphor that compares the LORD to a

³¹ Franz-J. Leenhardt, *La Notion de Sainteté dans l’Ancien Testament* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1929), 19-23.

³² Frank Michaeli, *Le Livre de l’Exode* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1974), 166.

³³ A. Lefèvre, “Saint est le Seigneur,” in *Grands Thèmes Bibliques* edited by M. E. Boismard, et al. (Paris: Éditions de Feu Nouveau, 1958), 52. Lefèvre’s own words are as follows: “La sainteté est l’abîme infranchissable qui rend Dieu inaccessible à la créature.”

great king issuing a covenant to his vassal. The LORD had chosen to come to Mount Sinai in a way designed to reveal His presence and to communicate with the Israelites, making it “private property,” where no one should expect to wander in and out oblivious to the wishes of the owner. For as long as the LORD visited that place, it was holy ground, an extension of His royal court. Coming there required a royal summons. It was not a casual meeting of equals.³⁴

ISAIAH 6 – YAHWEH AS HOLY

We now turn to Isaiah 6 to address the question arising naturally in our minds: if holy means essentially ‘consecrated’ or ‘devoted’, what then does it mean to apply this adjective to God? How is he consecrated or devoted?

Outline of Isaiah 6:1-13

I. Vision of Yahweh 6:1-4

II. Response of Isaiah 6:5-7

III. Commission of the Prophet 6:8-13

God is Awesome

Certain aspects of this text depict God as awesome and transcendent. Isaiah begins by telling us that he saw the Lord (יְהוָה), sitting upon a throne high and lifted up. God is exalted; he is the high King. We are told that the edges of his robe filled the Temple. This is not only an expression of the awesome greatness of God but clearly indicates that Isaiah was prostrate on the ground: this is why he could only see the edges or hem of his robe. This vision of God is similar to the theophany granted to the nobles of Israel when the Covenant with Israel was ratified on Mount Sinai in Exodus 24. There, too, they saw the God of Israel, but all that they report seeing are the bright blue lapis lazuli bricks under his feet. They, too, were flat out on the ground and they were so awe-struck that their eyes were raised no higher than the paving stones under God’s feet. We are further told in v. 3 that the glory of the Lord fills the earth. When the Tabernacle was built in Exodus 40, a bright cloud designated as the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle (vv. 34-35). Likewise,

³⁴ Dorian G. Coover-Cox, “Exodus,” in *HCSB Study Bible* (eds. Edwin A. Blum and Jeremy Royal Howard; Nashville, TN: Holman, 2010), 131.

when Solomon built and dedicated the Temple in 1 Kings 8, the glory of the Lord filled the Temple. Here in Isaiah's vision, the glory of the Lord fills the earth. This indicates that the entire earth is his sanctuary or temple and that he rules the whole world. Later on we will consider the seraphim, but already we can say at the start, that whatever they are, the word means "burning ones". They are beings of fire. In addition, the foundations of the door-posts shake and the place is filled with smoke. Earthquake, fire and smoke clearly speak of the God of Sinai. In Abram's vision in Genesis 15:17 God reveals himself as a smoking firepot and blazing torch. In Exodus 3:2, which is a foretaste and precursor to Sinai, he reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush. According to Exodus 19:16-19 God came on Mount Sinai accompanied by earthquake, fire, and smoke. He appeared similarly to Ezekiel in Chapter 1 in clouds and fire. In Daniel 7:9, 10 "His throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him". There is no question that the lord whom Isaiah sees is the God who made the covenant with Israel at Sinai.

God is Holy

The concept that God is holy is not new. This idea is found before Isaiah's time. Nonetheless, Isaiah's favorite term for God is the Holy One of Israel/Jacob. He uses this term some 26 times; outside of the Book of Isaiah it is found only six times. The vision of God given to Isaiah at the beginning of his life and ministry as a prophet profoundly affected his life and radically shaped his message and ministry. Thus the vision of Yahweh as a Holy God is not new. What is new is the particular message which God gives to Isaiah in verses 8-13.

In the text of Isaiah 6 it is when God appears to the prophet that Isaiah hears the voice of the seraphim proclaiming the 'holiness' of the Lord. This declaration accompanies the coming of God among men in the temple and attests his presence in the place of consecration. God appears in the place which belongs to him, the sanctuary, but he does not stay in the Holy of Holies, the place that is most consecrated. Instead he lets himself be seen by men in the front room of the Temple, the great hall. This is clearly evident from two or three facts in the text. The Hebrew word used here is הֵיכָל. In 1 Kings 6-8, the passage describing the construction of the temple, the word בַּיִת or 'house' is used for the Temple as a whole which is divided into two rooms: the front room or great hall is called the הֵיכָל and elsewhere the Holy Place; the back room is

called the דְּבִיר and later the Holy of Holies.³⁵ In Isaiah 6 the Lord is not in the דְּבִיר or Holy of Holies, he is in the הֵיכָל, the front room, the great hall of his palace. Note that the standard term for the Temple as a whole, בְּיַת, is used in v. 4 and clearly contrasts with הֵיכָל in v. 1. Secondly, Isaiah says that the bases of the door-posts shook. This makes it absolutely clear that the Lord is in the front room, because Isaiah is at the doorway and would not have been able to see into the back room from the doorway. So while God is awesome in his majesty, his holiness does not mean that he is the “Totally Other,” nor does it speak of his separation. In fact, we see just the opposite here: we see that God is coming to meet man (just as in Exodus 3); we see already the central theme of this new section of Isaiah: Immanuel, i.e. “God with us.”

Role of the Seraphim

Thirdly, Isaiah sees the seraphim in his vision. It is as important to note what he does not see as much as what he sees. He sees the seraphim and not the cherubim. Normally images of the cherubim guarded access to the presence of God in the Garden and the Temple. Their wings protected the mercy seat of the ark and they were on the curtains guarding the Holy of Holies. What, we may ask, is intended by the fact that Isaiah sees seraphim instead of cherubim? Our English word ‘seraphim’ is, in fact, not of English origin, but rather a loanword from Hebrew based on a rough transliteration of the plural form of the word *saraph* (*sārāp*; שָׂרָף).

³⁵ For הֵיכָל see 1 Kgs 6:5, 17, 7:50 = הֵיכָל הַבְּיַת 1 Kgs 6:3. For דְּבִיר see 1 Kgs 6:5, 16, 19, 23, 31; 7:49, 8:6, 8. The term for the whole, בְּיַת, occurs approximately 46 times in 1 Kgs 6-8. The דְּבִיר is also designated as the “Holy of Holies” in 1 Kgs 6:16, 8:6. The הֵיכָל is designated as the “Holy Place” in 1 Kgs 8:8, 10.

The word *saraph* is quite rare in the Hebrew Bible. The same word occurs in Numbers 21:6, 8 and refers to the fiery snakes or serpents which



struck the Israelites. It also refers to a fiery snake in Deut 8:15, Isaiah 14:29 and 30:6. In the occurrences in Isaiah 14 and 30 the seraphim are specifically designated as winged serpents which clearly connects them to the instances in Isaiah 6. It is interesting that we have annals from King Esarhaddon of Assyria describing his journey across the desert and in exactly the same spot where Israel encountered the fiery snakes he mentions strange creatures with batting wings.³⁶ Finally we have the two occurrences in Isaiah 6 for a total of seven instances in the entire Hebrew Bible. Probably the

word was transliterated instead of translated because the translators did not see how the seraphim here could be connected to the other occurrences where the word refers to snakes. Just because they have feet, hands, and faces, however, does not mean that they cannot be snakes.³⁷ We have pictures of winged snakes from both Egypt and Syria and they have feet, hands, and faces. According to Isaiah 14:29, a winged seraph is a symbol of a future Hebrew king. We have, in fact, Hebrew seals, some of them royal, with winged snakes on them.³⁸ Two are displayed

³⁶ James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 292b.

³⁷ Out of respect the seraphim cover their faces with one of their six pairs wings and their feet with another pair. It is possible that the context may require the meaning *pudenda* for feet here (see HALOT, s.v. לָרַגְלַי), so that covering the feet means “covering their genitals.” According to Exod 20:26, 28:42, Israelite priests contrasted with priests in the ancient Near East in that they were not to expose themselves in the worship of Yahweh. The action of the seraphim may be similar to this.

³⁸ For interpretation of the *seraphim* as snakes, see K. R. Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah’s Inaugural Vision,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 410-415, J. J. M. Roberts, “Solomon’s Jerusalem and Zion Tradition,” in *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology* edited by A. G. Vaughn and A. E. Killebrew (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 165-166, and esp. H. Cazelles, “La Vocation d’Isaïe (Ch. 6) et les Rites Royaux” in *Homenaje a Juan Prado* edited by L. Alvarez Verdes and E. J. Alonso Hernandez (Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1975) 89-108 and Othmar Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst: Eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und*

below, and the first of these two definitely belonged to a royal personage in Israel.³⁹

Hebrew Seals with Winged Snakes



Belonging to Elishama'
Son of the King



Belonging to Delayahu
son of Gemalyahu

If this interpretation is regarded as far-fetched, recall 2 Kings 18:4, a passage which describes King Hezekiah's efforts to rid the Temple worship of idols and idolatrous objects. One item mentioned is the bronze snake, i.e. the 'saraph' made by Moses, which by this time had become an object of idolatrous worship and the Israelites burned incense to it. Since Hezekiah became king in 715, this bronze snake was actually in the Temple at the time of King Uzziah's death in 740 when Isaiah was given this vision.

The seraphim constitute a direct allusion to Numbers 21:6, 8. Their purpose and role in the vision is to remind Isaiah and us of the journey out of Egypt to the Promised Land when they complained in the desert about God's great provisions in food and water. By complaining about his provision for them, the people were in reality saying that God was not

10 und Sach 4 (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 84/85; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977).

³⁹ Images are numbers 11 and 127 respectively in Nahman Avigad, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, revised and completed by Benjamin Sass (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997). See also Benjamin Sass and Christoph Uehlinger, eds., *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 125; Fribourg/Göttingen: University Press Fribourg / Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993).

completely devoted, and so they impugned his *holiness*. The people of Isaiah's time were promoting a society full of social injustice and saying that God should hurry up and bring the day of judgment that he promised. In this way they were saying he was not devoted to his justice and so impugned his holiness. Thus there is a clear parallel between the people of Isaiah's time and the people who journeyed through the desert.

Such a meaning for 'holy' is entirely consonant with uses of the word connected to the journey through the desert in Numbers. Numbers 20:9-13 is an example:

So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" 11 Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarrelled with the LORD and where he showed himself holy among them. (NIV)

The verb occurs in the *Hiphil* in v. 12 and in the *Niphal* stem in v. 13, adequately rendered in the NIV. Moses' and Aaron's act of disobedience did not treat Yahweh as holy, i.e. as completely devoted to the job of bringing the people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. He was not behind the project 100%. Even so, the actions of Yahweh **did** demonstrate precisely the fact that he was fully consecrated and devoted to his promise and task.

Another example similar to this is Isaiah 63:10 where we read that during the journey through the wilderness the people of Israel grieved God's holy spirit. The term spirit speaks of someone as they are empowered⁴⁰ and in the context, it is the messenger of his Presence that mediates God's care for the people in providing protection from cold and heat through the cloud and also food and water. Yet the people constantly questioned that God was devoted to his promise to bring them through and complained about his care and provisions for them.

⁴⁰ See Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974), 32-39, James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Indwelling Presence* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 39-40, and idem, "God With Men in the Torah," *WTJ* 65 (2003): 113-133.

In the vision of Isaiah, the seraphim cover themselves as a sign of respect and submission and Isaiah is conscious of his impurity. He is not ready to meet God: he is a man of unclean lips and he dwells in the midst of a people of unclean lips; he ought not to see the King, the Lord of Armies. Notice that the fear which inspires Isaiah is not a fear of holiness. He does not say, "my eyes have seen the Holy One," but rather "my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of Armies." As in Exodus 3, it is not the holiness of God which inspires fear, but the vision of God himself. In seeing God, the prophet dreads to be crushed by the majesty of the Sovereign King, and once purified, he does not hesitate to meet God in verse 8.

The fact that the word holy is repeated three times is not related to the New Testament doctrine of the Trinity; it is only a form of extreme emphasis in the Hebrew language (cf. Jer 7:4, 'Temple', Jer 22:29 'Land', Ezek 21:32 'Ruin' and Isaiah 6 'Holy').

What does it mean for Yahweh to be called holy? Hermeneutics requires, surely, that above all, we consider the context. And the context that is determinative for Isaiah 6 is found in Chapter 5. Expositions of Isaiah 6 that I have heard have not in general considered this context sufficiently. Literary analysis of Chapter 5 demonstrated the centrality of verse 16:⁴¹

So humanity is humbled and mankind is brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty will be brought low,
but the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.⁴²

Now in Isaiah 6:3, the repetition of the word three times means that God is absolutely holy. Holy means that He is completely devoted and in this particular context, devoted to his justice and righteousness which characterizes his instruction of people of Israel in the Covenant, showing them not only what it means to be devoted to him but also what it means to treat each other in a genuinely human way, in a word social justice. The holiness of God is clearly seen in Isaiah 5:16.

Isaiah's response confirms the understanding that the basic meaning of holiness is being devoted. Holiness is not identical with moral purity, although there is a connection. Holiness should not be defined as moral purity, but rather purity is the result of being completely devoted to God as defined by the Covenant. When he sees the vision of the Lord and

⁴¹ See Peter J. Gentry, "Isaiah and Social Justice," *Journal of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary*.

⁴² Translation that of H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 1:356-357.

hears the chorus of the seraphim, Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Isaiah does not say that he is impure or that the people are impure. He says that his lips and the lips of the people are impure. This refers to all his words and to all the words of the people. These words stand in contrast to the words of the seraphim. Isaiah and the people cannot participate in the worship led by the seraphim. The confession of unclean lips is the reason for the cry, "Woe is me for I am ruined / I am undone." The verb which is translated undone can also be translated, "Woe is me for I am silenced."⁴³ Because his lips and the lips of the covenant people are filled with words challenging God's justice and impugning his holiness, they are unclean and not able to join in the chorus of worship with the seraphim. They have been silenced and may not join the true worship of God. We can and ought to apply this to the church today. Do we consider that the church's failure to implement God's righteous standards as we find them in the New Testament will silence our worship?

An action from one of the seraphim brings about cleansing of his speech and atonement. One of the seraphim takes a burning coal from the altar using tongs and brings it to Isaiah and causes it to touch his lips. Let us notice at once that what is used to purify Isaiah is exactly what is promised to the people of Judah as a whole in 1:31, 5:5, and 6:13: fire. Thus, the purification of Isaiah is a forecast or harbinger of the coming judgment which will purify the people as a whole. The atonement is also an act of divine grace. The fire comes from the altar. This indicates that atonement is made by sacrifice and not by achievements on the part of Isaiah.

God is King

It is extremely important to remember that behind the human king in Israel stands the real king, Yahweh himself. In 1 Sam 8:7, the people desire a king like the nations surrounding them. This is a human wielding absolute power for the purposes of self-aggrandizement. The Lord tells Samuel, "it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king." When God makes the covenant with David in 2 Sam 7, it is clear that the purpose of this covenant is for the king to fulfill the earlier plan prescribed by Moses in Deut 17. The Israelite King must represent the divine King. And that is precisely the point in both v. 1 and v. 5 of Isaiah 6. In v. 1 we are told that Isaiah was given this vision in the year that King Uzziah died. At such a time there would be a change of regime.

⁴³ See, e.g. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, 3rd ed. by W. Baumgartner, J. J. Stamm and B. Hartmann (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967-1995), s.v. I זמך and III זמך.

It might be an opportunity for those falsely imprisoned to be retried and released under the dawning of a new era of social justice. The title given in v. 5 to Yahweh is not simply a statement that Yahweh is king. In fact the Lord is referred to in the usual way in which the human kings in Israel are referred to in 1 and 2 Kings. It is like saying, "in the year that President Obama finished his second term of office I saw the real president, the Lord of Armies."

COMMISSION

In v. 8 Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord saying "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Why does the Lord use the plural? Why does he say, "Who will go for us?" What does this mean? This does not mean that the faith of Israel is in many gods, nor is it a remnant of an old polytheism. It is not even an indication of the Trinity, which is not clearly revealed until the coming of Jesus Christ. It is an expression which would have been understood in the ancient Near East to refer to the fact that the heavenly King is speaking in the divine court or council and Isaiah the prophet is **given access** to that council. It indicates that Isaiah is an authorised agent who really does know the mind and will of God and is commissioned to bring it to the people.

The commission he is given seems extremely strange. The people will really hear but not gain insight. They will really see but not know at all. Their heart, centre of the place where they feel, think, and make decisions will not be granted insight or understanding. It seems crazy to send a person on a mission that will fail. It seems to be cold and hard-hearted to prevent repentance and restoration. Yet we must not misunderstand the text. Yahweh is describing for Isaiah not the content of his message but (by way of metonymy) the effect and results of his preaching. In vv. 9-10 we see that it will harden hearts and in vv. 11-12 it will lead to the devastation of the land and the people. The reason for this is clear. The people have already rejected the divine message. We have already seen in the first five chapters their arrogance and indifference. The result of Isaiah's preaching will be to confirm the response they have already made and to bring about the judgment which has already been predicted. These verses, then, show that judgment is certain and inevitable and there will be no situation like Jonah's preaching to Nineveh where the people repented and God reversed the judgment. These verses are also a reminder that the results of our preaching and our witness are in God's hands, and not in our own.

It is now possible to explain why the vision begins or opens with a vision of God's transcendence. Why is it that at the beginning Isaiah sees Yahweh as exalted and awesome? He sees Yahweh as high and exalted

because he is beyond manipulation. He sees Yahweh sitting on his throne for judgment and there will be no possibility for influencing this to our own advantage. If you go to a court situation and the judge is your friend or you have a lawyer who is best pals with the judge, then you do not really fear the outcome. It is clear from the outset that we are not in a palsy-walsy situation with the judge and have no means of our own to reach him and influence his mind on the verdict. We can only await his sentence. He is truly above and beyond us. Sentence has been passed on the nation in heaven; Isaiah's preaching will put it into effect on earth.

And yet there is a hope, even though it is extremely slender. This is expressed in v. 13. At first the picture of judgment is bleak. After the devastation and death only a tenth will remain. And even this surviving tenth will be subjected to further judgment. There are a number of problems in v. 13 and scholars differ greatly on the details.⁴⁴ The general picture, however, is roughly the same. It may refer to two great trees just outside one of the gates of Jerusalem which were burned. All that was left was the blackened trunk and branches stripped bare. It seemed that the tree was dead and could only be cut down and the stump taken out. And yet there was life and new growth came. In the Old Testament kings or kingdoms were pictured as majestic, tall, stately trees. The Davidic dynasty seems to be a tree that is dead. And yet, somehow, out of this trunk will spring new life and the promises of God will be fulfilled. We see here the messianic hope of Isaiah. It may be that true Israel will be reduced to one faithful person before the rebuilding process begins.

This is only the beginnings of a fresh study of the word 'holy' in the Old Testament. Interestingly, if one begins to analyse the counterpart in Greek, the word ἅγιος, the basic meaning given in LSJ is also "devoted."⁴⁵ New Testament scholars should pay closer attention to this.

Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* states that "God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor."⁴⁶ Further reading yields a discussion that is traditional so that the use of the word 'devoted' in his opening sentence is confused with the notion of separation. Indeed, the systematic theologians of the last five hundred years have not been helpful in explaining what scripture teaches on this topic due to reliance on doubtful etymologies and connection of

⁴⁴ For a thorough treatment of the problems in the text, see See Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique Textuelle de l'Ancien Testament*, 2, Isaïe, Jérémie, Lamentations (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 50/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 41-44.

⁴⁵ H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with revised Supplement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), s.v. ἅγιος.

⁴⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 203.

the term with moral purity and divine transcendence. As we have seen, purity is the result of being holy in the biblical sense, but is not the meaning of the word. Nor is the word connected with divine transcendence however much this idea is otherwise made plain in Scripture.⁴⁷ The basic meaning of the word is “consecrated” or “devoted.” In scripture it operates within the context of covenant relationships and expresses commitment. The notion of divine transcendence in Isaiah 6 is there to demonstrate that the holiness of Yahweh, i.e. his dedication to social justice in this particular situation, cannot be manipulated and judgment is certain. That explains the coincidence of holiness and divine transcendence in this text.

One day in the barnyard, the hen and the pig were discussing the difference in meaning between the words “involvement” and “commitment.” The pig told the hen, “When the farmer comes for breakfast tomorrow, you’re only involved, but I’m committed.” The cross is a revelation of the divine holiness.

CONCLUSION

This short study should not only illuminate clearly and simply the meaning of holy and what it means for God to be holy, but also provide a warning that every generation needs to test theological traditions by means of fresh study of the Bible in the original texts. We cannot simply rely on our systematic theologies for an understanding of Christian teaching. Luke commended believers in Berea as more noble than those in Thessalonica because they daily examined the scriptures to see if what they were taught was true (Acts 17:11). Around 600, a Scotch-Irish mission led by Columbanus appeared in the Frankish kingdom. For the first time the Franks became acquainted with a Christianity which made extraordinary high demands—but not on others, rather on itself. They saw clerics who were godly shepherds, whose learning surpassed anything found in the Frankish Kingdom. Kurt Aland says, “We hear about a conflict between the Scotch-Irish Columbanus and a papal legate who confronted him with the old tradition of the continental church, to which Columbanus retorted: The truth which drives out error is older than every tradition.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Although “holy” and “transcendence” are both in the context of Isaiah 6, it is false to assume that they are equivalent. They are connected or related in that the one who is devoted to social justice is the supreme judge and cannot be bribed, bought out, or overpowered.

⁴⁸ Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 1:240.

We are in a unique position today to make advances in our grasp and understanding of the scriptures. Historically, Christian theology was developed almost entirely from the Latin or Greek versions of the Bible for the first fifteen hundred years. Although the reformers stressed the importance of studying the original texts we have been more eager to study their works than heed their cry, “*ad fontes*.” The last three hundred years have been marred by a scholarship which imposes **modern western** notions of literary analysis on **ancient eastern** texts. At the same time, huge advances have been made in the last 150 years in the knowledge of the cultural backdrop of the text and its linguistic data. In the last forty years, literary structures, especially in the Old Testament, have been elucidated. There is also, now, after two hundred years a new willingness to construct a metanarrative based on Scripture itself and not simply upon systems which owe more to modern philosophy than the Bible for their larger story. Unfortunately, when biblical studies went awry, systematic theologians struggled on continuing to defend truth, but have been woefully lacking in exegesis. Put succinctly, the problem has been that systematic theologians, (1) do not give sufficient attention to the shape of the text, (2) do not perceive the communicative and literary modes in the text, and (3) employ a framework of reasoning which throttles the direction and focus of the text.

Compartmentalising study of the Bible into Old and New Testaments, Historical and Systematic Theology does not always help. It frequently aids in predetermining what questions we can ask of the text and hence the answers we receive. This amounts to a low view of scripture no matter how loudly we proclaim inerrancy.

As a young pastor serving in the boondocks and hinterlands of Ontario in Canada, I heard that Carl F. H. Henry would be giving a lecture in Montreal, six hours drive from my town. The following statement made a deep impression on me:

Activism today so hurries evangelical worship, prayer, and Bible reading, theological study and reflection, that we risk becoming practical atheists steeped in this-worldly priorities. Theological renewal is a farce apart from time for God in his Word. Is it too much to ask Christians in favored North America, in their struggle to be evangelically authentic, to do their theological homework once again, to feast on mighty truths that can rebuff the blows of an ungodly age, to learn biblical lessons before the sword and dungeons overtake them?⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Christian Mindset in A Secular Society: Promoting Evangelical Renewal & National Righteousness* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1978), 28.