

OVERLOOKED VOICES ON HOLINESS

AN EXPLORATION OF THE IDEA OF HOLINESS
FOR THE FORMATION OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE
WISDOM, PETRINE AND HEBREWS TRADITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In 1790, near the end of his life, John Wesley speaking of holiness declared: ‘this doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up.’¹ Holiness thus has been the abiding concern of the people called Methodists. However, it has also been the abiding concern of a wider group, those called the people of God. In the Old Testament and the New among the traditions of priests, prophets and sages, as well as the reflections of apostles and followers of Jesus we find continuing concern for holiness.

In this paper we listen to voices on holiness easily overlooked. Much of the study of holiness in the Old Testament centres on priestly or prophetic tradition, predominantly the priestly holiness code of Leviticus or prophetic calls to social justice embodied most strongly in Isaiah and Amos. However, less attention is given to holiness thought as expressed in the wisdom tradition. Similarly in the New Testament, theological exploration is rightly dominated by focus on the Gospel and Pauline traditions which together comprise most of the New Testament canon. However there are insights to be gleaned from other less well travelled areas, not least in Peter and Hebrews. This paper then looks at holiness

¹ John Wesley, *The Letters of John Wesley Vol VIII*, Ed. John Telford, (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 238.

in three biblical traditions, Wisdom, Peter and Hebrews to see what insights these overlooked voices might offer into our understandings of holiness.

HOLINESS IN THE WISDOM TRADITION

Holiness does not at first appear to be a major focus of the wisdom tradition; vocabulary from the *qâdôsh/hagios* word group is infrequent and there is little of the concern for cult we find among priestly writers or of the social justice common in the prophetic tradition. However, we need to heed Dunn's apposite warning that the presence of holiness in the biblical tradition should not be limited to places where the *qâdôsh/hagios* word group appears.² Thus upon closer examination we find that the sages are very much concerned with the idea of holiness though they approach this in novel ways. We find this especially in the book of Job where not only is the question of Job's holiness explored but also that of God's. In fact, it may be argued that the sub plot of the book of Job is not the question of whether Job is holy and righteous but rather whether God is. The other major biblical source of holiness thought in the wisdom tradition is the book of Proverbs not least because, as Bergant argues, "The book of Proverbs is the basic source of the study of biblical wisdom."³

Clements rightly notes a certain deistic tendency in the wisdom tradition where God is virtually hidden in rules of order, justice and morality.⁴ Therefore there appears to be less overt exploration of questions of holiness. This is especially the

²cf. James D G Dunn, "Jesus and Holiness: The Challenge of Purity," *Holiness Past & Present* (Ed.) Stephen C Barton, (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 169.

³ Diane Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 78.

⁴ cf. Ronald E Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 164ff.

case in Proverbs. Clements argues further that the wisdom tradition, particularly Proverbs, emerges out of the liminal experience of exile and suggests that this explains its limited use of holiness vocabulary. In his view, away from Temple and cult it was necessary for the sages to reconsider and reconstruct ideas of holiness.⁵ So how is holiness reconsidered and reconstructed in the wisdom tradition? Holiness in the wisdom tradition is perceived primarily in terms of the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is a crucial phrase in Proverbs and in Job, who is repeatedly described both by the all-seeing narrator and by God as one who fears God. Thus Clements argues rightly in my view:

If we ask the question how the sages came to describe a supremely virtuous attitude of life, then the answer is given very clearly. It is a pattern of life moulded shaped, and guided by the ‘fear of the Lord’ (*yir’ at YHWH*).⁶

REFLECTING ON JOB’S EXPERIENCE

The story of Job is a well-known one; it charts the experience of a man who seems to have reached the *telos* of the wisdom tradition. From the very first verse he is described as blameless, upright, and fearing God – an assessment repeated by God himself on two subsequent occasions (1.8, 2.3). The story then explores how Job responds to the disasters that befall him and his family and all throughout this substantial book we have differing reflections on Job’s experience, ultimately summed up by God’s positive assessment of Job in the end. The book is an excellent example of experiential reflection on holiness, for not only is there reflection on Job’s experience of suffering, despite his fear of the Lord, the book is also deeply subversive right from the start.

⁵ cf. Clements, 59ff.

⁶ Clements, 60. cf. also Charles F Melchert, *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1998) for this view.

OUTSIDE THE LAND

Moberly notes that the most positive description of righteousness and holiness in the wisdom tradition, if not the whole biblical tradition, is applied to a man from Uz. Wherever Uz may have been, it was not in Israel. The wisdom tradition indicates a view, therefore, that holiness was not somehow the sole preserve of the covenant people of God.⁷ Indeed, one may go further and argue that the sages seem to suggest that in order to find the best example of holiness one is best off looking outside of Israel; indeed this is what God appears to do!

OUTSIDE THE CULT

Not only is Job outside of the land (and therefore possibly a non-Israelite and thus outside the covenant) also he is outside the cult for once he is afflicted by loathsome sores (which would likely have been understood as leprosy), he was rendered unclean and therefore would have been disqualified from participating in the cult. It must be acknowledged that the dating of Job is notoriously difficult and so it is by no means clear whether the story predates the priestly cultic regulations. What is clear is that the story, in common with much of the Old Testament, is collated somewhere around the time of the exile by which time the cult is very much centre stage in Israelite consciousness.

Clements argues rightly that part of the sub plot of the book of Job is to try to tease apart the ideas of sinfulness and sickness, specifically the idea that the latter is the result of the former. The wisdom tradition here challenges cultic assumptions that holiness and wholeness are necessarily found together. The idea

⁷ cf. R W L Moberly, "Solomon & Job: Divine Wisdom in Human Life." *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?* Ed. Stephen C Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999), 9-10.

of Job, possibly a Gentile leper, who is singled out by God for being exceptionally blameless, upright and God fearing goes against all of the generally held cultic assumptions about holiness.⁸

However, this not to say that Job is merely a radical subversive document whose main purpose is to challenge the status quo. On the contrary, it is a document which seeks to engage in experiential reflection: Is it possible for lepers to be holy? Does God care for Gentiles as well as Jews? Is sickness related to sinfulness? Can holiness be found outside the covenant people of God?

OUTSIDE THE NORM

The experiential reflection in which the book of Job engages does not stop with its radical reflection on the possibility of a holy gentile leper, it goes much further. In Job the very idea of God's holiness is explored and we discover God portrayed in a way which is very much outside the norm, not least in Job's accusation that God himself is his tormentor, his enemy and not his friend. According to von Rad we find in Job (cf. 16.7-14), 'God as the direct enemy of men, delighting in torturing them, hovering over them like what we might call the caricature of a devil, gnashing his teeth... and splitting open Job's intestines.'⁹ Perhaps even more strikingly we find at the end of the book God rebuking Job's counsellors for not speaking of him what is right, as Job had done (42.7). This presumably means that Job's accusation of God as dealing with him unfairly is upheld. Put bluntly, Job was right all along in protesting his innocence and God was wrong!

⁸ cf. Clements, 88ff for more on this view.

⁹ von Rad, 217. For a similar view cf. also D J A Clines, *Job 21-37* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 1037.

What we have in this encounter is a clash between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The wisdom tradition seems to hold both these ideas in tension,¹⁰ not least in the story of Job. The book tells us from the beginning that Job's fortunes for good and ill come from the hand of God. At the end of the book when God does finally answer Job at no stage does he offer an explanation or justification for his actions in allowing all these hardships to befall him, he does not pull back the curtains to allow Job to see that his misfortunes are the result of some kind of divine wager against the satan. Instead God simply reaffirms his sovereignty and challenges Job for his audacity in questioning God. In short the sovereignty of God is upheld. However human responsibility so also upheld. Throughout the story Job holds on to his integrity and does not simply acquiesce to the idea that since God is sovereign he can do what he likes; rather Job challenges God to justify his actions and desires his day in court so that he can protest his innocence (cf. Job 19.1ff)

All of these experiential reflections from the book of Job have major relevance to the question of holiness in the wisdom tradition, for the question of holiness dominates the book of Job. It is perhaps the central issue, and is certainly the reason that Job is singled out. It was because 'there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil' (1.8) that God asked the satan whether he had considered his servant Job.

¹⁰ cf. Bergant, 46ff and Clements, 167ff for similar views.

The book of Job, along with the rest of the wisdom tradition, offers us significant insights into Sapiential understandings of holiness. The sages in contrast to the priests and prophets do not necessarily presuppose the cult and the covenant in their expression of holiness. Certainly the cult may be implied in their understanding of holiness in terms of the fear of the Lord but this need not be the case. By moving away from cult and covenant the sages are able to reconsider and recast holiness and to explore previously unthinkable concepts. They are able to conceive of a holy leper, possibly a holy gentile, perhaps the holiest man on the earth, but who lives in an unholy land among unholy people presumably without access to the means of grace that would be otherwise provided by the cult. Even more daringly, than this, the question of God's holiness is explored. Whereas priests and prophets take as their starting point that holiness is God's very nature, sages dare to question whether this is indeed the case. All of this exploration is rooted in experience. Though not everyone will have known a Job, we all have known of cases in which bad things happened to good people, we have experienced the apparent absence of God, we have seen injustice in the world; and with the sages ask, 'Where is a holy God in all of this?' Ultimately, of course, the sages do not offer conclusive explanations and God's ways remain inscrutable.

Nonetheless, at least three significant insights into holiness may be gleaned from the experiential reflection of the sages. First, holiness for the sages is internalised. One is not holy because of what is on the outside but what is on the inside. Job, though likely a Gentile leper living in an unholy land, is nonetheless able to be holy and to retain his holiness despite all that befalls him. The sages tease apart

notions of uncleanness and holiness and suggest that the former does not necessarily rule out the latter. Second, as a result of this internalisation, holiness cannot circumscribed by covenant or cult. Even those outside of both can be holy, not least because God himself is not circumscribed by covenant or cult. Third, holiness represents a tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. How do we know that Job is holy? Because God describes him as such on a number of occasions. Put another way, Job is holy because God declares him to be holy. This is the divine sovereignty pole. At one and the same time Job's holiness is preserved because of his efforts. He does not sin with his lips (2.10) despite all that befalls him, he speaks of God what is right (42.7), and he maintains his integrity and blamelessness (9.20-21). The sages affirm that there is an ongoing tension in the idea of holiness; it is bestowed by God and yet requires human effort and pursuit.

HOLINESS IN THE PETER TRADITION

In looking at holiness in the Peter tradition we of course look at 1 Peter. This immediately raises the issue of authorship. It is a well-known fact that the authorship of Peter is disputed and many scholars doubt the letter was written by Peter. There is a variety of reasons for this, including the suggestion that letter betrays too many Pauline similarities, reflects a period later than the commonly held dating of Peter's death, and possesses a standard of Greek thought to be beyond the capacity of a Galilean fisherman.¹¹ However, issues of authorship

¹¹ For a good summary of the authorship question cf. J Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* Waco: Word, 1988.

need not detain us here. Whatever one's viewpoint on authorship, 1 Peter nonetheless has interesting insights to offer on the question of holiness.

1 Peter, written to Gentile Christians facing actual or anticipated persecution is intended to offer hope as well as to remind the recipients of the greatness of the salvation of which they are beneficiaries. The letter spends no time mollicodding the recipients but urges them to pursue holiness in all their conduct. Part of the reason the letter takes this approach is because of its eschatological outlook. Davids argues, 'The whole of 1 Peter is characterized by an eschatological, even apocalyptic focus. It is not possible to understand the work without appreciating this focus.'¹² He argues further, 'If eschatology is the underlying theme of the epistle, holiness is the goal. In the face of final judgement the Christians are called to community solidarity and personal holiness.'¹³

1 Peter is interesting for many reasons. It is a letter addressed to Gentile Christians which assumes that the OT promises and the obligations which applied to the Jewish people now apply equally to these Gentiles. Perhaps most striking is Lev 19:2, originally addressed to the people of Israel, being reinterpreted to apply to Gentile Christians. 1 Peter declares, 'as he who has called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct.' It goes on to describe these Gentiles as a holy priesthood, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and a chosen race. So how is holiness understood in the Peter tradition?

¹² Peter H Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 15.

¹³ Davids, 17.

RELATIONSHIP NOT RULES

Goppelt argues that holiness in Peter is understood primarily in terms of belonging; those who were not a people had now become the holy people of God. He asserts, ‘The ἅγιος is the one who belongs to God (2.9); only God is by nature holy. Holiness is not an “attribute” of God but an expression of his being....’¹⁴ In similar vein Boring rightly notes that 1 Peter makes explicit that Christian holiness is derivative and corresponds to God’s holiness.¹⁵

AN ESCHATOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE

Holiness in 1 Peter is also an eschatological imperative. On the one hand, this can be positively perceived. Perkins rightly argues that holiness in 1 Peter promises believers a share in Christ’s glory yet to be revealed. This is at least what it means to be a chosen race and holy nation, once not a people but now people of God.¹⁶ On the other hand, this can be negatively perceived. Davids warns that holiness is not optional. Christians are called to be holy because God is holy (1.15) but also because he is the One who judges all (1.17). Holiness, he argues, is therefore both privilege and protection in light of the coming judgement.¹⁷

HOLINESS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A particular feature of holiness in the Peter tradition is the idea of holiness being part of the everyday and the ordinary. Indeed, perhaps the most innovative element of 1 Peter’s reapplication of the Leviticus holiness code to the Gentile

¹⁴ Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 111.

¹⁵ M Eugene Boring, *1 Peter* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 80.

¹⁶ cf. PHEME PERKINS, *First & Second Peter, James and Jude* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 21.

¹⁷ cf. Davids, 17.

Christian context is applying the idea of holiness to daily life (ἀναστροφή).¹⁸ In Goppelt's view, holiness in Peter is manifest not in religiosity set apart from the world, but in daily life.¹⁹ Chester and Martin concur, noting that in 1 Peter holy living is unpacked in down to earth terms: e.g., being courteous and kind (3.8) and cultivating a gentle and tranquil spirit (3.4).²⁰ Perhaps Michaels puts it best:

Holiness, which in many religious traditions epitomizes all that is set apart from the world and assigned to a distinctly ceremonial sphere of its own, is in Peter's terminology brought face to face with ... everyday life.²¹

Holiness in the Peter tradition, then, is rooted in the idea of relationship rather than rules, is an urgent and current need in light of the perceived imminent eschatological encounter with the Holy One of Israel, and is set in the context of the everyday rather than the set apart.

HOLINESS IN THE HEBREWS TRADITION

A generation ago, Dunn in his *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* noted that traditional Pentecostalism formed its theology primarily in relation to the book of Acts, suggesting that for them Paul need not have written anything²² (apart from 1 Cor 12-14 perhaps?). He refers to this as finding a canon within the canon. For those who have some familiarity with the holiness movement they recognise that their canon within the canon is very much shaped by Hebrews, particularly its discussion of 'holiness without which none shall see the Lord' (12.14). Hynson

¹⁸ So argues Michaels, 59.

¹⁹ cf. Goppelt, 111.

²⁰ cf. A Chester & R Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 125.

²¹ Michaels, 59.

²² cf. James D G Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM, 1970), 103.

argues, ‘As Luther developed a hermeneutic of justification, the Holiness people developed a hermeneutic of holiness.’²³ This hermeneutic was shaped very significantly by the book of Hebrews; thus it is important to include the Hebrews tradition in this exploration located within a Wesleyan perspective.

So what does Hebrews have to say about holiness? Hebrews uses a range of terms in speaking of holiness. It speaks of perfection (τελειοῦν), the same root word we came across in Matt 5.48 and 19.21, it speaks of sanctifying (ἀγιάζων) and holiness (ἀγιασμόν), it speaks of holy (ὅσιος), it speaks of purified (καθαριεῖ) conscience. Clearly, there is some overlap of meaning in these terms.

BELIEVERS ALREADY SANCTIFIED

A number of themes emerge in the study of holiness in Hebrews. Perhaps one of the most striking is the conceptual framework of the writer which assumes the holiness of God and the holiness of his people as a given. Unlike in 1 Peter 1.16 where the pursuit of holiness is urged (be holy as God is holy) here the holiness of God, of Christ, and of his people is assumed. Hebrews 10.10 asserts, ‘it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all,’ i.e., Christians are already sanctified. Perhaps this is unsurprising in light of the fact that the writer is clearly steeped in the traditions of the OT and the cult and assumes (rightly or wrongly) that his readers are equally conversant. Therefore, he assumes that since Christians are the people of God then by virtue of that fact they are the holy people of God.

²³ cf. Leo Hynson, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral In The American Holiness Tradition” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* Volume 20, Number 1, Spring, 1985, 20.

JESUS AS SANCTIFIER

Interestingly it is Jesus who is the sanctifier in Hebrews; by the will of God, yes, but it is Jesus who is the sanctifier, nonetheless. In the Old Testament, in contrast, it is Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, who is seen as the sanctifier. Peterson argues that Hebrews talks of being sanctified by Christ as a finished work, i.e., the sanctification of Christians is complete. An awareness of this sanctification brings about conviction of conscience in believers which results in dedicated service to God.²⁴ Lane makes a similar observation: 'In Hebrews human endeavour is never the subject of sanctification. Christ alone is the one who consecrates others to God through his sacrificial death.'²⁵

ESCHATOLOGICAL IN CHARACTER

Holiness in Hebrews, as is the case in 1 Peter, is thoroughly eschatological in character. It is perhaps one of the reasons that the writer is happy to speak of perfection. In Peterson's view, perfection in Hebrews is not moral, nor is it a euphemism for sanctification, or cleansing from sin, but is a term pointing to the final fulfilment and consummation of relationship between God and humanity, i.e., it is eschatological perfection.²⁶ He states, 'Believers are perfected in the perfecting of Christ. ...their perfection is already accomplished by Christ.'²⁷ While I would disagree with Peterson's sharp demarcation between perfection and sanctification and would understand perfection as inclusive of sanctification, cleansing from sin, etc, I do, nonetheless, think he is right to locate perfection in

²⁴ cf. David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 38ff.

²⁵ William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 450.

²⁶ cf. Peterson, 36ff for more on this view.

²⁷ Peterson, 175.

Hebrews in the eschatological work of Christ. Lane has a similar viewpoint, arguing that in Hebrews holiness (ἁγιασμός) does not possess an ethical significance but is eschatological in character.²⁸

This eschatological character is partly the reason Hebrews speaks of pursuing holiness, without which none shall see the Lord. In commenting on 12.10, which refers to God disciplining us in order that we might share his holiness, Bruce argues rightly that the holiness discussed here is ‘the goal for which God is preparing his people – that entire sanctification which is consummated at their manifestation with Christ in glory.’²⁹ The pursuit of this sanctification, then, without which none shall see the Lord, is not an optional extra but essential to the life of a Christian.³⁰ Lane observes that the verb translated ‘pursue’ (δίωκειν) is a stronger term than the more commonly used ‘seek’ (ζητεῖν)³¹ which connotes the earnest pursuit of holiness and the urgency of the command. This urgency is especially necessary since in Hebrews holiness is understood to be the provision which alone allows access into the presence of God.³²

NOW & NOT YET

Because holiness in Hebrews has this eschatological sub plot there is an ongoing tension between the now and the not yet. This is why in Hebrews despite the fact that the sanctification of believers is assumed they are nonetheless urged to pursue holiness without which none shall see the Lord. Bockmuehl explains:

²⁸ cf. Lane, 450.

²⁹ F F Bruce, *Commentary of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964), 344.

³⁰ cf. Bruce (1964), 348.

³¹ cf. Lane 449.

³² cf. Lane, 450.

[Sanctification] is understood first as a saving event in the past in which believers were sanctified ‘once and for all’ Thus they can now regularly be addressed as *hagiasmenoi*, the sanctified... or as saints (*hagioi*). Sanctification is also seen as an ongoing and future work of God....’³³

Koester also notes this tension in Hebrews; the readers have already been made holy through Christ’s sacrifice (9.14) but do not yet fully share in God’s holiness (12.10).³⁴ This is the tension between the already and the not yet. This tension is crucial in all talk of holiness because of its eschatological character.

In passing, it is worth noting the observation of Barton that holiness is made possible, ironically and paradoxically, through the profanity and defilement of a corpse.³⁵ This irony would not have been lost on a writer thoroughly conversant with the cult and serves only to heighten the eschatological nuance of holiness.

Holiness in Hebrews, then, is complex and diverse; a wide range of words is used to speak of holiness. Believers are already holy but yet are to pursue holiness for holiness is now but also not yet; holiness is thoroughly eschatological in nature and not primarily ethical but also is not to be separated from ethics.

What we have in human experience of holiness, then, is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, glimpses of the future, a deposit of what is to come, and the first fruits of the harvest. This perhaps helps to objectify the tension between the now and not yet and to resolve it in some measure. First fruits are indeed real

³³ K Bockmuehl, “Sanctification.” *New Dictionary of Theology*, (Eds.) S B Ferguson, & D F Wright, (Leicester: IVP, 1987), 613.

³⁴ cf. Craig R Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 539.

³⁵ cf. Stephen C Barton, “Dislocating and Relocating Holiness: A New Testament Study.” *Holiness Past & Present* (Ed.) Stephen C Barton, (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 206.

fruit but not the whole of the harvest. A deposit is hard cash in hand but only a fraction of the due sum. A foretaste and a glimpse are genuine experiences of tasting and seeing but are inevitably frustrating in their fleetingness. So it is with holiness in the picture that is emerging both of these New Testament traditions, it is of this age but primarily of the age to come. The pursuit of holiness is to seek to experience the age to come breaking into the present age. Holiness is therefore the enduring concern of the people of God. Valantasis in his book *Centuries of Holiness* describes holiness in these terms:

holiness and sanctification develop out of the constant remembrance of God. So what each one does during the day connects with the reality of God, and each activity of the day becomes revelatory of the presence of God. ³⁶

RECURRING THEMES ON HOLINESS

So what conclusions can we begin to draw from these voices on holiness? What we begin to see is a variety of understandings of holiness but with numerous points of overlap and congruence. From these overlooked voices on holiness seven broad themes seem to emerge: (a) Holiness is divine; (b) Holiness is relational; (c) Holiness is corporate; (d) Holiness is everyday; (e) Holiness is ethical; (f) Holiness is eschatological; (g) Holiness is perfection. These themes are not necessarily present in each of the texts explored, nor is emphasis equally distributed. Nonetheless, these themes seem consistently to arise as we listen to our overlooked voices on holiness. To an exploration of each of these themes we now turn.

³⁶ Richard Valantasis, *Centuries of Holiness* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 36.

HOLINESS IS DIVINE

Perhaps one of the most consistent themes to emerge is that holiness is ultimately divine. Put another way, holiness is a description of the divine sphere; it is a designation that properly pertains to God alone. God alone is holy in and of himself; holiness in any other sphere, whether of object or space, time or person, is derived and secondary. It is God who alone is the Holy *One*.

As previously noted we find Leviticus 19.2 reinterpreted and reapplied in the New Testament, principally in 1 Peter, where the injunction to be holy is predicated by the fact that God is holy. A similar understanding also underpins the assumption of Hebrews that believers have already been sanctified. In each of these texts the idea that holiness is the quintessential quality of God³⁷ and thus properly a reference to the divine is reaffirmed. Moreover, that holiness is the quintessence of God requires that we recognise that human holiness is therefore a work of grace. Thus we find in the book of Job that Job is blameless, not merely because of his own efforts but because he is declared to be so by God.

HOLINESS IS RELATIONSHIP

The recognition that human holiness is a work of grace brings us nicely to the second of our themes to emerge from the biblical witness: holiness issues from relationship to the Holy One. Indeed it is in my view the principal means of understanding human holiness if one understands holiness to be ultimately God's possession. All talk of holiness other than God's necessarily therefore refers to a

³⁷cf. scholars like Douglas, Gammie, Goppelt, Milgrom, Hartley, and C Wright for this view.

derived holiness. As Hartley notes, “Because only Yahweh is intrinsically holy, any person or thing is holy only as it stands in relation to him.”³⁸

It is striking how widely this theme is found either explicitly in the text or implicit. In Hebrews we find the novel perspective that the sanctification of the people of God is simply assumed; this is because of the writer’s view that as people belonging to God they, therefore, share his holiness. It is their relationship to the holy one rather than any other activity on their part which is the source of this sanctification. In 1 Peter, we find similar sentiments; they are to be holy because God is holy. What is in view is not merely the *imitatio dei*, rather they are to act out what they are already. This is at least part of the reason 1 Peter makes the point that those who were not a people had now become the people of God and a holy nation; because they now are the people of God, they can be and must be holy.

HOLINESS IS CORPORATE

Much of the discussion of holiness thus far may suggest holiness is an individual pursuit and, of course, there is some merit to this idea. However, when we recall the OT idea of the people of God being holy and thus being a light to the Gentiles (cf. Isa 42.6), clearly what is in view is not merely holy individuals but a holy people.

Looking at the biblical witness in both Testaments it is clear that not every individual among the people of God was indeed holy. The sacrificial system, the ministry of the prophets, the instructions and rebukes of the apostolic writers, all

³⁸Hartley, lvii.

attest to the fact that not all God's people are holy all of the time, and yet they remain the holy people of God. The question that immediately comes to mind, then, is how can a people be holy without each individual being holy?

This apparent contradiction may be in some measure resolved if holiness is understood as relationship. People are holy not because they are good, or righteous, but because of their relationship to the Holy One. Put another way, there is an ontological sharing in the nature of God; because the people of God belong to the divine sphere they reflect his nature in much the same way that inanimate objects may be rendered holy by entering the divine sphere. It is out of this existing reality of holiness that people are called to live out the demands of holiness. Some people do this faithfully; others do this less faithfully. What this inevitably leads to is a tension between the corporate holiness of the people of God and the failure of individuals to behave in a manner which is consistent with their being the holy people of God. Some of this tension will be explored further in the paragraphs looking at the inherently eschatological character of holiness. What needs to be noted here is that the idea of holiness as relationship enables us to hold on to both a corporate and an individual understanding of holiness.

It strikes me further that corporate holiness is rooted in the triune nature of God. If holiness is God's quintessential nature, fundamentally who God is, it may be inferred, then, that the holiness of God exists only in the community of the Godhead, in the eternal relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. This being the case holiness is primarily corporate and only secondarily individual. If it is

true that the holiness of God finds expression primarily in the context of eternal relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit then it seems reasonable to deduce that not only is human holiness experienced solely in relationship to the Holy One but also human holiness may only be experienced in the context of relationship to the holy people of God.

HOLINESS IS ROOTED IN THE EVERYDAY

Following on from the idea of holiness rooted in relationship to others is the idea of holiness rooted in the everyday. This is the particular concern of 1 Peter; holiness is to be a feature of everyday life (ἀναστροφή). This is, of course, not novel; it is part and parcel of the Old Testament text which 1 Peter is seeking to apply to a New Testament context. Leviticus unpacks holiness in terms of farmers leaving some of the harvest for the poor, employers not exploiting workers, the able-bodied not taking advantage of the disabled (cf. Lev 19.9-13). 1 Peter, perhaps cognizant of the urban rather than agrarian context of his hearers, expounds holiness simply in terms of everyday conduct. Chester and Martin note that holy living in 1 Peter is unpacked in down to earth terms such as being courteous and kind (3.8) and cultivating a gentle and tranquil spirit (3.4).³⁹

HOLINESS IS ETHICAL

This leads into the next theme, that of the idea of holiness as transformative. Holiness is not a thing that one can possess but it is nonetheless an objective reality. Part of the evidence of its objective reality is its affective nature; simply

³⁹cf. A Chester & R Martin, 125.

put, being made holy through relationship to the holy One does not leave the entity, object, or person unchanged, rather it is transformed.

One of the areas in which transformation is expected is in the area of ethics. This paper has made the point that holiness is not merely to be equated with adherence to ethical rules. Put another way, ethical is not a synonym for holy. Nonetheless, it would be a gross mistake to argue that holiness and ethics have nothing in common. Indeed in all of the texts we have explored we see an assumption of a necessary link between holiness and good ethical behaviour.

It should be noted that the holy requirement of good ethical behaviour infers not only a negative prohibition of sinfulness but also a positive pursuit of righteousness. In Leviticus 19 which underpins 1 Peter 2 holy ethics includes the negative prohibition of idols, theft, lies, fraud, and vengeance, but also includes the positive pursuit of justice, care for the poor, alien, and disabled, Sabbath keeping, and the honest transaction of business. In Job's defence it is that he has done no wrong which keeps him hopeful of vindication.

The biblical witness is consistent in declaring that there is a fundamental contradiction between holiness and sinfulness; they should not coexist. In fact, it is because holiness and good ethical behaviour are usually found together that there is danger of conflating the two. Just as life requires light, so holiness requires good ethics. However, just as we are able to differentiate light from life, so too we must be able to differentiate holiness from good ethical behaviour.

Nevertheless, human experience amply demonstrates that holiness and sinfulness do in fact coexist, despite the assertions of the above paragraph. This is precisely because all too often the holy people of God fail to behave in a manner consistent with their being God's holy people. In what sense, then, can it be asserted that holiness is ethical? Holiness is ethical in the sense that human holiness is expressed in terms of good ethical conduct. However, owing to the eschatological nature of holiness the apprehension and expression of holiness continues to be incomplete. To a discussion of this issue we now turn.

HOLINESS IS ESCHATOLOGICAL

Part of the reason for the close relationship between holiness and ethics is the eschatological nuance of holiness. This eschatological nuance, along with the idea of holiness as relationship, is perhaps one of the most insightful elements to emerge from this study. If holiness is in essence divine, then the presence of the holy among us is a sign of the divine breaking in upon the present and in this sense at least holiness is eschatologically nuanced. Owing to this eschatological nuance, holiness demonstrates a tension between the now and the not yet, it exhibits elements of judgement, and it offers glimpses into the divine.

NOW AND NOT YET

Perhaps the most positive element of the eschatological character of holiness is that it is sign of the age to come breaking in upon the present age. Because holiness is always a matter of divine dispensation it is always a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God. This means that holiness necessarily shares the now/not yet tension of the kingdom of God. Believers are already holy now,

because of their sharing in the objective reality of the holiness of Christ our true High Priest. And yet they are still working towards holiness and are to be actively in pursuit of holiness, without which none shall see the Lord. We are children of God now, we are a royal priesthood and a holy nation now, and we who were not a people have already become the people of God through the action of Christ. Nonetheless, we have not yet become perfect as our Father is perfect (Matt 5.48), we have not yet entered into God's rest as has the pioneer of our salvation (Heb 4.11,14), we have not yet seen with our eyes the living hope of an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven (1 Pet 1.4) nor like Job having heard with the ears become able to see with the eyes (Job 42.5)

JUDGEMENT

The eschatological character of holiness also includes an element of judgment. Certainly in the New Testament texts explored, there is an expectation of the end of the age and of judgement in 1 Peter or Hebrews and Job looks forward to 'the last' when he might see his Redeemer (19.25)

HOLINESS IS PERFECTION

It is this eschatological understanding of holiness which enables us to speak with greater clarity of holiness as perfection. Many within the Wesleyan tradition have some unease with the idea of Christian Perfection.⁴⁰ These concerns are understandable, for perfection is something that we are instinctively

⁴⁰ This unease with the terminology of perfection is not novel; it can be traced at least as far back as Wesley in the mid 1700s. From his journals we discover that he had to defend his doctrine of Christian Perfection over and over again.

uncomfortable ascribing to ourselves. Moreover, to many the idea of holiness as perfection perhaps sounds uncomfortably close to sinlessness.

However, when we remember the eschatological nuance of holiness then some of these concerns begin to melt away. If holiness properly belongs to the divine sphere and to the age to come then the idea of holiness as perfection becomes perhaps a little less objectionable. Though we might not be entirely clear what this perfecting might entail, we are perhaps intuitively less inclined to take issue with the idea of being perfected in the age to come.

It does, of course, need to be acknowledged that the word translated perfect (τέλειος) is closer in meaning to ‘complete and whole’ than it is to ‘that which cannot be improved in any way.’ But even this clarification does not move us on very much because many feel that humanity is far from complete and will remain so no matter how much they grow in holiness. This issue has perhaps as much to do with one’s anthropology as it does with one’s theology.

Nonetheless, perfection is undeniably one of the themes of holiness which emerges from the biblical tradition and it cannot simply be ignored because it is inconvenient or even incomprehensible. So how might this idea of holiness as perfection be understood? Noting the inherently eschatological nature of holiness we therefore understand holiness as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a glimpse of the future, a deposit of what is to come, and the first fruits of the harvest. So it is with holiness as perfection, it is understood as genuine but incomplete perfection.

WHAT IS HOLINESS?

Having reviewed these recurring themes on holiness we are perhaps now in a better position to discern a harmony among these overlooked voices on holiness. Holiness is ultimately God's alone because it is his quintessential quality. Whenever we speak of holiness we therefore speak of the presence and the action of the divine for holiness is possible only through gracious divine dispensation. Holiness is therefore relational; persons and places, times and spaces can only be holy as they relate to and share in the character of the Holy One or in some way come under his sphere of belonging.

Owing to the fact that holiness is relational it is therefore rooted in everyday experience. Indeed this is the enduring eschatological vision, that every part of the cosmos be transformed by the redemptive work of Christ, so that our ethics, our values, our relationship and our very beings reflect the nature of the one who has 'called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.' Holiness is, therefore, inherently eschatological; it is a vision of what is to come; a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, it is the first fruits of the perfection of the age to come.

So what is holiness? It is to have an eschatological relationship with the Holy One which transforms our ethics, our everyday lives, our established societal patterns and even the entire cosmos so that they reflect the perfection of the age that is to come. Holiness is to share in the life of the divine by the gracious act of the Father, in his Son, through the power of the Spirit.