

Enfolding Others: Social Holiness in the Bible and Biblical Interpretation

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Without truth telling there is no peacemaking¹

Introduction

Whereas social holiness takes many forms throughout the Scriptures, the treatment of the Other, the non-Israelite or non-Jew, is the concern of this chapter.² When we examine the story of Israel and God in the Bible—ever intertwined, we find tensions that must be faced regarding Israel—and God’s—relationships to Others, those persons constructed as not-Israel in the Bible. The Bible supplies a mixed account of how Israel treated Others, and, in some troubling places, this must be extended to God, in that Israel is portrayed as acting on God’s orders. The encounters between Israel and Others, as described in the Bible, either embody or undermine social holiness, righteousness, and justice, broadly speaking.

In this chapter, I examine the correspondence and conflict between holiness and Othering, between set apart to be distinct from Others and set apart to serve and bless Others. I point out that Others in the Bible, as elsewhere, are textually and socially constructed, then illustrate the tension in the Bible regarding insider-outsider relations, a crucial site for embodying social holiness.³ This entails discussing the meaning of holiness/*qadosh* and how it gathers substance as the biblical story unfolds, requiring the social behaviors that embody justice/*mishpat*, righteousness/*tsedakah*, and mercy/*hesed*. Thus, I show that holiness/*qadosh* is the resulting state of having been set apart: the person or thing has been set apart/*qadash*, for a purpose.

¹Jean Zaru, “Biblical Teachings and the Hard Realities of Life,” in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology*, ed. by Kwok Pui-Ian (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 136.

² I capitalize “Others” to indicate the groups and individuals textually depicted as “not Israel.” These Others encounter Israel as outsiders in various, instructive ways. Sometimes persons within Israel are textually marginalized or Othered, such as women or people from other tribes. In lower case, “others” refers to any persons distinguished from “us,” the dominant group or the producers of the texts.

³ Textual construction reflects social construction by the writers and their group, but one is not identical with the other.

After recognizing the reasons given for Israel's distinctiveness from surrounding cultures (holiness), I turn to the texts that show some Others presented as models for faithfulness and lauded for preserving Israel. At this juncture, we must examine the texts that show Others as set aside, designated as *herem* (God's possession alone) and thus destroyed. We shall see that *herem* is used in the Bible, along with *qadosh*, to mean a state of being set apart, but to a radically different end. I conclude by affirming *qadosh*, holiness as way by which God's people demonstrate justice and righteousness in order to represent God as they seek to embrace Others and proclaim an era of release—a Jubilee.

Perspectives on the authoritative nature of Scripture and certain interpretations of Scripture must be problematized here, for invaders throughout history have used biblical *herem* texts to oppress Others and take their land. In so doing, I rely upon Jean Zaru of Palestine, who is among the global community of scholars who have experienced marginalization by dominant forces in their cultures and from their faith and scholarly communities. Post-colonial biblical interpreters such as Zaru and Richard Horsley eloquently confess the hazards of deploying authoritative texts and interpretations to conquer, confiscate, and oppress. They join other scholars who critique abusive reading and interpretive processes.⁴ As Zaru writes:

While generations of religious people have derived profit and pleasure from the retelling of biblical stories, victims of oppression—including especially women from global communities of faith—pose fundamental moral questions with regard to understanding God, God's dealings with humankind, and human behavior. Many of these biblical traditions have been deployed in support of violent oppressive actions in a wide variety of contexts. In the spirit of contemporary moral discourse, it is a matter of grave concern that the Bible has been used and is still being used by many as a rod of colonialism, oppression, and the domination of women. . . .The problem is not only with the interpretation of the text but also with the way in which many understand the Bible as holding all the authority of the word of God. Yet the Word of God is much more than

⁴ Richard A. Horsley, "Submerged Biblical Histories and Imperial Biblical Studies," in *The Postcolonial Bible* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1998), 152-173.

that. The Bible is a history of people's experiences of God and of how these people perceived God, but it is not the whole reality of God."⁵

I use Zaru's bold statement at the outset of this paper to emphasize what Wesleyans consider a vital foundation of biblical interpretation. Scripture points to God and witnesses to God's dynamic activity and interactions with people; Scripture recounts the story of God incarnate, Jesus Christ. However, Scripture is not, in itself, divine. It is a multivalent library, representing many human voices as they instruct, inspire, preach, and make sense of their encounters with God, their history, and their traditions. They continuously cry: Remember and be grateful; remember and be obedient!

In this great pedagogical treatise, the Bible, Others are sometimes the foil for God's people representing how Israel should not live. The Bible's Others illustrate the results of idolatry, forgetting, and ingratitude. Yet, as already noted, there are stunning exceptions that do the opposite: Others show Israel how anyone, anywhere can walk with God in faithfulness and how Israel should live before God. They shame Israel by their faithfulness, determination, wits, and/or awe of God.

A passage that governs this discussion of mostly Old Testament texts is Luke 4:16-30. The incident described there sets the theme and foreshadows the rest of Luke's gospel. At the outset of Jesus' ministry, he pointed out to his fellow Nazarenes that, in their sacred traditions, Others—people known to be not-Israel—received demonstrable acts of healing, justice, mercy, and blessing. After reading Isa 61:1-2, Jesus reminded them that the LORD used both Elijah and Elisha to help foreigners, members of nations who were Israel's enemies.⁶ This proved controversial. Had Jesus referenced Scriptural traditions about captive Israel triumphing over oppressors, his neighbors would have continued to laud him. Instead they attempted to rush him over a cliff (Luke 4:16-30)!⁷ The fact that both sorts of stories are in the Bible—Israel

⁵ Zaru, "Biblical Teachings,"131.

⁶ Isaiah 61:1-2: The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, liberation to the imprisoned; to proclaim a year of the Lord's favor, and a day of vindication by our God.

⁷ Luke 4:16-30: When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to

overcoming Others and Israel blessing Others— represents the canon’s tension regarding “us” and “them,” insiders and outsiders. And yet Jesus, in an inaugural moment in the text, did *not* tell a story about Israel triumphing over others, but a story about Elijah and Elisha helping Others.

Israel and Others

The biblical narrative explains the origins of Others within accounts of Israel’s genesis and in relation to Israel. Early on, we see that the text constructs Insiders (Israel) and Outsiders (Others) over against each other. Although Israel and Others have their origins in common, as Genesis narratives and genealogies show, they are separated from Others as the story moves forward (Gen 10-12).⁸ This is *Israel’s* story, and the writers are Jews or their ancestors; they construct the text that constructs Israel and Others.

For example, Genesis narratives describe the formation of Israel, Edom, Moabites, Ammonites, and Midianites as descendant of Terah, Abraham’s father (Gen 12, 19, 25). As the story proceeds throughout the Pentateuch and beyond, it recounts affiliations and conflicts between Israelites and their erstwhile relatives. Israel also encountered the peoples whose connections to Israel are pre-Abrahamic, going back to the sons of Noah whose descendants spread over the face of the land, separated by geography, culture and language (Gen 9-11, see especially 9:18-27). In both cases, all of these are defined as Other to Israel who alone descended from Jacob/Israel and experienced slavery in and deliverance from Egypt. Later Jews, as we shall see when we turn to the book of Ezra, wished to define a Jew as one a Babylonian exile.

say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarepheth in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way (NRSV, 1989).

⁸ Israel was united to or joined by Others through marriage, kinship rites, faith confessions, shared experiences, and permeable boundaries.

On the other hand, biblical narratives show that shared experiences, faith in Israel's god, and/or a desire to join Israel brought Others into Israel and coalesced people who were not descended from Abraham (Gen 38; 41:45, 48; Exod 2-4; 12:38; Josh 2; 8; 24; Num 10, Ezra 6; Ruth, and etc.). In either case, by defining Others through traditions about origins, Israel defined itself.⁹ From the Torah, we hear how God encountered the Jews' ancestors and Others (e.g. Hagar, Gen 16, 21; Zipporah, Exod 2-4; 18; Hobab, Num 10; and *passim*). We learn God's thoughts concerning Others in the Prophets (e.g. Amos 5:8-9). We watch how God in the flesh treated Others in the New Testament (e.g. Mk 7:24-30). From Scripture, we learn how to weigh and interpret the portions of Scripture that depict Others as a threat to be avoided or ruined. And we learn the purpose for Israel's distinctiveness, the meaning of Israel's holiness.

Holiness in the Bible

Wesley used the term "social holiness" to advocate Christians living righteously in community. Wesley wrote: "Directly opposite to this [the approach of the desert mystics] is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy solitaries" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness."¹⁰ In the Bible, holiness is always social, always connected to human communities, always relational; even when it is used to describe Israel's God. The Bible shows that Israel's God, who is called holy, continuously interacts and interferes with humans, encountering people in various ways to shape and use them, to sanctify them, to set them apart for service. Human encounters with God sometimes leave the woman or man stunned by the numinous quality of God's holiness (Isa 6:1-5), but often they are depicted as responding simply and naturally, as a man would speak to his peer (Exod 33:11; Exod 3-4, 32; Num 14; and etc.).

⁹ See Karen Strand Winslow, "Ethnicity, Exogamy, and Zipporah," *Women in Judaism*, Spr 2006, Online Interdisciplinary Journal; idem, *Jewish and Christian Memories of Moses' Wives: Ethnicity and Exogamous Marriage* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005); idem and Luke Winslow, "Ezra's 'Holy Seed': Marriage and COMMunities of Others in the Bible," presentation at Religion and Communication Association Conference, Nov 15, 2012, Orlando.

¹⁰ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*. Volume XIV preface to poetical works (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 321. Many of Wesley's followers use the term "social holiness" to mean caring for the poor, which Wesley's life also exemplified.

God's holiness is sometimes considered something that belongs to God alone. God is "wholly other" from humans and completely beyond human comprehension.¹¹ However, biblical writers connect divine holiness to people and things. A holy God happens and humans respond with awe; they experience God and God's holiness and report on the contact. The primary characters of the Bible are people who see God and live.¹² Furthermore, God's holiness is revealed and transmitted to humans. God's holiness may be unique, but it is not inimitable! In fact, God requires such imitation. "For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44); "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev 19:1-2). This command is cited in 1 Peter 1:15-16: "Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct;¹⁶ for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" This will be expanded upon further below.

God's holiness is associated with God's glory in Isa 6:3. "And one [seraph] called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'" God's weighty, spectacular, frightening, and humbling glory fills the entire world, a world that humans inhabit (see Exod 19:10-13, 16-24). God's glory is God's holiness made manifest. Thus, even at its farthest remove, God's holiness has something to do with humans who live in the world that God's glory fills. God's holiness touches us, and we, like Isaiah, know it.¹³ Not only this, but one of God's names: "the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 1:4) connects God's holiness to a community. We cannot understand God's dynamic and holy nature except as members of communities who were brought into being by God. Thus God's holiness has relational and social aspects. Although God's holiness is unique to God, it is a revealed, shared, and relational holiness.

¹¹ One example will suffice. According to Matt Slick of <http://carm.org/dictionary-wholly-other>, "the term 'wholly other' is used in Christian theology to describe the difference between God and everything else. God, the Christian God, is completely different than all other things that exist. God can be described by essential properties such as holiness, immutability, etc. Matt Slick, "Wholly Other," *Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry*, Feb. 1, 2013, <http://carm.org/dictionary-wholly-other> We must ask how we, as finite creatures, can relate to the "wholly other," infinite God. .

¹² Many biblical characters experience theophanies or direct words from the LORD, beginning with Adam and continuing with Cain, Abraham, Hagar, Sarah, Rebekah, Jacob, Moses, the elders (Exod 24), Joshua, Manoah's wife, and prophets.

¹³ Isa 6:5-6: And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it . . ."

For example, in addition to expressing the awesome, fearful, wonderful, and numinous quality of God's holiness (Gen 32, Exod 34, and Judg 13), biblical writers claim that people and things were made holy. They include the reasons and means by which this was accomplished. People and things were sanctified, literally *set apart from* other people and things *for service to* the community of Israel and to all the families of the world. Blessing Others was God's purpose for directing Abraham to leave his home at the beginning of Israel's story.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation (Hebrew: *goy*), and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Whereas social holiness pertains to living in a community that is set apart by encounters with and conformity to God holiness, which is similar to Wesley's use of the term; it also includes the outcome, the purpose for which God established and deployed the community: blessing and service, as Gen 12:1-3 so aptly shows. Furthermore, in Exod 19:5-6 the LORD spoke to Israel: "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all peoples, for all the earth is mine; but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Just as God set apart Israel, so also Israel was required to continually and intentionally regard God as holy and the source of their own holiness. Intentionally setting God apart, according to both narrative and law sections of the Torah, meant honoring and revering God by obeying covenantal commands, many of which concerned justice, righteousness, and mercy. In this way, holiness gathers substance. As the biblical story unfolds, Israel's holiness is manifested as justice *mishpat*, righteousness *tsedakah*, and mercy *hesed*, all of which are social. Early in Abraham's walk with God, we find this account regarding Abraham's influence upon the potential destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?"¹⁹ No, for I have *chosen* him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord *by doing righteousness and justice*; so that the

Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen 18:17-19, NRSV; my italics).

The selection of Abraham eventuated in setting apart his offspring, sanctifying them for special service. But even before they came into existence, their purpose is *to do* righteousness and justice. God’s people were required to live like God lives in order to experience and represent God’s ways to others/Others (Lev 20:26; Deut 26:19).¹⁴ The consecrated group, office, individual, or thing does not exist to be served, but to serve. This is what we understand about God, taking in the wholeness of the biblical witness, the sustained message of the canon and its collections. As it is with God so it must be with Israel.

Biblical social holiness, that which is mandatory of God’s people in their dealings with each other (insiders to Israel) and Others (outsiders to Israel), is based upon the God’s nature and actions, as some have observed.¹⁵ The overall story of the Bible illustrates that when people live justly, with righteousness, love, and mercy toward others, they demonstrate the holiness of God. This is what is usually understood as “social holiness” (communal/shared separation), although this is something of an oxymoron, turned paradox, for, although holiness means set apart, it must be expressed to and through human communities. And not only among the people of Israel but by them to Others.

Nonetheless, for Israel to have substance and content, for them to embody God’s ways, they must exist, be identifiable, and survive as a separate people group. Otherwise, Israel would not exist to demonstrate the ways of God to Others. Tracing the necessity for boundaries around Israel will help us to see how their set-apartness/holiness, was essential to their continued existence.

Israel Separated from Others

¹⁴ See Matt 11:5: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them; Ps 146:7-8: “who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous; Ps 146:7, 8. See also Isa 42:7, 49:8, 9, 58:6.

¹⁵ See the recent chapter by Job and Spina, “Holiness in the Old Testament,” in *Holiness as a Liberal Art* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 20-29. Furthermore, in his plenary address to the 2013 Wesleyan Theological Society Meeting (Seattle, Wash, Mar 23), Thomas Dozeman demonstrated the different perspectives on human holiness held by the Deuteronomistic (D) and the Priestly (P) writers. In Deut, people were holy (separated) and justified through divine speech to all the people. In Deut, social holiness—ethics—protects cultic holiness from the contamination of the world and provides justification. For the Priestly writer, cultic holiness is not transferred to the people, but social holiness (ethics) perfects the transfer of holiness to the people. D and P agree that God makes people holy. Dozeman said that D would disagree with Wesley who said there is no [private] holiness; it must be communal. P would agree with Wesley: social holiness perfects cultic holiness.

In Lev 20:26, the LORD spoke to Israel: “You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.” Here we see that Israel’s consecration—their holiness—meant separation from Others, that God’s people, who will be taught how to be holy, are intentionally distinct from Others. To be consecrated persons (Israel, priests, Nazirites) or things (tabernacle, temple and its furnishings) are differentiated from other people or things that belong to the “common” or “profane” category.¹⁶ Consecrated or holy has no meaning if those so designated act or are used in the same way as everyone and everything else. Without selection, election, proscriptions, unique experiences, instructions—torah—from Yahweh, we would have no story about people living before God, learning God’s ways, and bringing salvation, wholeness and hope to the world. A few examples of the value of separation from the biblical text are in order.

Let us examine some imagined contingencies within the world of the story. If Isaac had married a neighbor girl, instead of Rebekah, Israel would have been assimilated into the Hittites or other Canaanites (Gen 23-4). If Jacob’s sons had moved into Shechem and intermarried and shared resources, they would have become Shechemites, not Israelites (Gen 34; although their violence was not condoned by Jacob or the writer).¹⁷ If the progeny of Jacob had not been abhorrent to the Egyptians and thus isolated in Goshen, they may have become Egyptians (Gen 45:17; 46:28-34).¹⁸

Subsequent stories indicate the risk that Israel could have been lost entirely had they been absorbed into the land and culture of the Canaanites (Josh-Judg), Assyrians (2 Kgs 17), Babylonians (2 Kgs 25, Jeremiah), Greeks (1-2 Maccabees), or Romans (New Testament period). Israel’s task was to survive and an identifiable people group who lived before the LORD in righteousness and justice. They were to convey the meaning of holiness by how they lived. The message they embodied by surviving as Israel would have ended if they had assimilated into surrounding cultures and lost their identity and their stories.

¹⁶ These terms are merely labels for that which has not been designated as holy and they do not imply sinfulness or immorality. However, some people and things belong to a category that is on the other end of the continuum: *herem*. See Richard D. Nelson, “*Herem* and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience,” in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature; Festschrift C. H. W. Brekelmans*, ed. by M. Vervenne and J. Lust (Leuven: University Press, 1997), 39-54.

¹⁷ However, Simeon and Levi captured the women of Shechem and took them into their family encampment before moving on (Gen 34:5-31).

¹⁸ Notice that Joseph married an Egyptian and this two famous sons, eponymous ancestors of the Joseph tribes were half Egyptian! (Gen 41:45-52).

Following Israel's story in which they were always at risk, "the fewest of all peoples" (Deut 7:7), shows that Israel could not have survived without land or identifying marks and practices that distinguished them from Others. Nonetheless, we must also recognize the Scriptures' emphasis on the faith of Outsiders, as well as the benefits that the *goyim*, the nations, brought to Israel.¹⁹ Social holiness goes both ways in the biblical text; individuals and nations of the world blessed Israel.

Others Preserved Israel

Israel's story shows that, as nascent Israel grew and developed into a distinct and known people, Others nurtured, served, and preserved them. Outsiders expanded, enriched, and were enfolded into Israel. The Bible is laden with examples of intermarriage from Judah (his first Canaanite wife, then Tamar who gave him sons, Gen 38); Joseph (Asenath, mother of Ephraim and Manasseh Gen 41:45; 48) to Moses, Naomi's sons, Boaz, David, and Esther.²⁰ These marriages produced offspring that built up Israel. Any proscriptions against intermarriage were based upon Israel's proneness to idolatry and apostasy. For example, Joshua's generation was not allowed to intermarry with Canaanites in the central cities, the same *herem* Canaanites they were supposed to "utterly destroy" (Deut 7:2-4).

In addition, the biblical story includes numerous positive examples of outsider women preserving Israel apart from bearing children. Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses from death as a baby (Exod 1:5-10). And in Exod 4:24-26, we learn that Zipporah, by circumcising her son, saved Moses' life from the LORD's attempt to kill him. Zipporah was a Midianite *woman* who demonstrated the significance of circumcision for Israel's males. Even Moses' life was in danger for failing to bring his son into Israel in this way. The only other named circumcisers in the Bible are Abraham and Joshua.²¹ Other outsiders confessed faith in the LORD and acted with loyalty to Israel (Jethro, Exod 18; Rahab, Josh 2; Ruth). These narratives intentionally challenge Israel to be as faithful as these outsiders.

Egypt was a place of sustenance for Abraham's household and all of Jacob's sons and their families when there was famine in Canaan. Some of Egypt's kings allowed Israel to flourish, giving Joseph's brothers jobs, the best of the land, and other provisions so that they

¹⁹ See Frank A. Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

²⁰ Solomon was strictly rebuked for his idolatry, which the writer associates with his building shrines to the gods of his many wives (1 Kgs 11; Neh 13: 23-27).

²¹ See Karen Strand Winslow, *Early Jewish*, 19-97.

grew and thrived (Gen 46-47) and this is remembered in Deut 10:19: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt;” and Deut 23: 7-8: “. . . You shall not abhor any of the Egyptians, because you were an alien residing in their land. The children of the third generation that are born to them may be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”

These sometimes overlooked accounts must be central to any discussion of Israel’s relationship to Others in the Bible. As pointed out above, the library of the Bible does not speak with one voice in this regard. Others are included and admired, but sometimes Others are denigrated, even harmed. The difference in treatment was not a matter of bloodlines (although in some cases it was connected to their location and their related desire to curse or tempt Israel as in Num 22-25). The Others who are marked as heroines or heroes expressed faith in Israel’s god and/or saved and nurtured Israel, in sharp contrast to Others who led Israel to apostasy and idolatry (Num 25), or who gathered to fight Israel (Num 21-21-36; Josh 5). Others who confessed faith in the LORD or preserved Israel are held up as exemplary.²²

On one level, it should come as no surprise that different views on Others exist, given that the Bible is a collection of books and genres that convey meanings for, of, and by different people, under changing circumstances over a long period of time. An ancient Jewish library should contain multiple human expressions of Israel’s story about Israel. On another level, a witness in Scripture about violence against Others must be recognized as a problem that demonstrating the multi-voice/multi-valency of Scripture regarding Others will not resolve.

Thus, it is time to turn to biblical texts that depict dispossession, war, vengeance, and exclusivity. The question remains: how could a God of justice, righteousness, not to mention mercy and compassion, command violence against Others by people who were being trained in holiness? As noted above, the Others who were under the ban of *herem* could have led Israel to apostasy, but this is an indictment of Israel’s weakness. Was there not another way to procure a place for Israel to live and thrive? Many have asked that question. I wonder here if the *herem* texts that command the destruction of whole cities are literary examples of what Kevin Lowery describes when he writes: “History is strewn with atrocities that have been committed in God’s

²² The friendly Midianites of Exod 2,4,18 and Num 10 performed rites of hospitality, covenant making, communion, and service. Hostile Moabites in Num 25 (Midianites in ch 31) led Israel to apostasy through ritual acts of sex, sacrifice, and eating. See the discussion in Winslow, *Early Jewish*, 2005, 88-97.

name.”²³ The next section explores the notion of *herem* as it appears in the Bible and considers how it compares and contrasts with *qadosh*, holiness.

Others Under the Ban of *Herem*

As we examine the extreme form of Othering represented by the ban of *herem*, we must keep in mind the command found in Lev 19:34 concerning outsiders who lived among the Israelites: "You shall love the alien as yourself." Deuteronomy is also filled with such directives that protect outsiders to Israel.²⁴ These directives are identifying marks of Israel that are *behavioral*, not genetic or biological.²⁵ Many commands that mark or define Israel are just, loving, and merciful *actions* that show concern for aliens, widows, orphans, strangers, sojourners—Others. They show what God is like, what God likes, what God can do through people.

Other commands seem morally neutral, indicating unique ways Israel marked itself out as distinct from greater nations in order to survive (food laws, circumcision, worship rituals). And yet Israel was also given orders to destroy Others, namely, actions associated with the Deuteronomistic ban of *herem*. In these cases, Israel's distinction came at a price to the Others who lived in certain areas of Canaan.²⁶ Israel carved out a place (under divine, Mosaic, or priestly command) by destroying Others (Deut 7:1-2; 20:16-18; Josh 6; 10, esp. v 40; 1 Sam 15). Whereas Israel was set apart—*qadosh*— for service and blessing, certain Canaanite Others were set apart under the ban of *herem* for destruction.

²³ Kevin Twain Lowery, "Ethics as Relational," in *Relational Theology Issues and Implications*, ed. by Brint Montgomery, Thomas J. Oord and Karen Strand Winslow (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock; published in association with Point Loma Nazarene University Press 2012), 90. Lowery goes on to say: "Many problems arise when people fail to recognize the relational nature of ethics. It is even worse when they use God's name to justify immoral acts, because they become too self-assured and refuse to listen to reason."

²⁴ For example, Deut 10:17: "The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." See also Deut 24:10-22.

²⁵ To disabuse Jews of the notion that being the seed of Abraham privileged his listeners, John the Baptist said: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham (Matt 3:9). This is not a New Testament. innovation, as I have shown above.

²⁶ Those first subjected to *herem* were the Canaanites who gathered troops to fight against Israel (Josh 5; 10:1-42). These battles were the result of Israel's pact with Gibeon to protect them. Gibeon was one of the central cities (and under the ban), but they deceived Israel into promising protection. When the Gibeonites were threatened by other kings and armies from the central hill country, they appealed to Israel, who fought for them, and, in this way gained access to the central region. So there is a bit of a twist to the story in Joshua; Israel was fighting for a city that was supposed to be *herem*.

As Richard Nelson explains, for Israel and surrounding nations, the term *herem* meant destruction of things and people to whom it was applied because these things must not be used by humans. In Israel's case, *herem* items were Yahweh's unalienable property.²⁷ Persons could not be slaves and cattle could not be deployed by ordinary humans for any purpose.²⁸ In contrast, the spoil from *non-herem* battles included virgins—Midianite Others—who were counted and given to priests (Num 31), or taken captive and then married (Deut 21:10-14).

These anti-Other commands that appear relatively early in Israel's story (canonically speaking), when they were a tribal confederation, are joined by incidents from much later, which are associated with past *herem* peoples. The book of Ezra recounts Shecaniah and Ezra's attempt to expel wives from the restored Jewish community of Persian Yehud, indigenous women to whom the Jews were legally bound (Ezra 9-10). To inflame Ezra's anger over the "intermarriage," the officials told him that the returned male Jews "had not separated themselves from," they had "mixed with" the peoples of the land. The officials labeled these wives who had not been among the exiles of Babylon: "Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites" (Ezra 9:1-2).

The first four nations had disappeared from history (and had been under the ban of *herem* in Deut-Josh). However, the last four were the returned Jews' neighbors and some had probably intermarried with the Jews left behind in Judah, now Persian Yehud. The officials used the first four historically impossible labels to compare marriage in the restoration period to the dangers of assimilation with *herem* people groups from the conquest period (Ezra 9:1-2). In this way, the officials Othered the wives, who were indigenous women of the land of Judah, descendants of Judahites left behind or mixed with those brought in from other places during the exile. As James Kugel notes, the purpose of aligning the latter four real people groups with the first four extinct groups is to claim that Deuteronomy's bans on intermarriage must surely apply to the living "non-Israel" peoples of the restoration period. This is clearly not Deuteronomy's view concerning the latter four people groups.²⁹ After I turn to the studies of

²⁷ Nelson, "*Herem*," 39-54.

²⁸ In some texts, *herem* land or items were claimed by priests (Num 18:14; Ezek 44:29). The core meaning of *herem* is not destruction, working out a war vow, religious justification for total war, or sacrifice, according to Nelson. Instead it means belonging to the gods, as in *herem* to Yahweh (Lev 27:28-29; Micah 4:13; Josh 6:17; and in the Mesha inscription line 17). It is a "cultural map category." See Nelson, "*Herem*," 43-47, and *passim*.

²⁹ James Kugel, "The Holiness of Israel and the Land in Second Temple Times," *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, ed. by Michael Fox, et al (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 21-32; 24.

Mark Brett and Yair Hoffman who suggest historical settings that gave rise to these texts, I will conclude with a discussion of the hermeneutical questions.

Mark Brett (following other scholars) sees Deuteronomy as an example of “discursive hybridity”: a mix of literary conventions and transformations located in a web of mimicry (appropriating forms of the dominant culture) and ideological contestation.”³⁰ He goes on to apply mimetic desire to Deuteronomy, noting how it turns these around, urging Israel *not* to imitate, *not* to learn or be taught the detestable ways of those other nations (Deut 18:9; 20:17-18). This is followed by the legal discourse of *herem*, “the exclusion of near rivals,” who are on an “ambiguous margin,” made to be more foreign because the “Deuteronomic authors wish to inscribe boundaries of exclusive loyalty to Yahweh.” The conflicts were more civil than foreign. For example, the *herem* banning of Israelites disloyal to Yahweh in Deut 13 is the same as that of Canaanites in Deut 20. Syncretists (those in the community who worship Yahweh *and* other gods, perhaps refugees from the north) are scapegoated and Othered.

Brett associates the *herem* texts with the Assyrian crisis of the seventh century that claimed the northern kingdom and Josiah’s reform, during which priests of northern high places were the only ones slaughtered (2 Kgs 23:5, 20, 24; compare 23:8-9). “There is no evidence that the Deuteronomic reform led to mass killings.” However, Brett continues, “it is the reception of these texts in Christian tradition which has yielded the most violent consequences, notably when Christian hermeneutics was wedded to colonialism.”

In another vein, Yair Hoffman argues that the practice of *herem* of Canaanites was depicted by the Persian period author of Joshua in order to make irrelevant and anachronistic any association of women of the land (wives of previously exiled male Jews) with Canaanite people groups, as the officials speaking to Ezra attempted to do (Ezra 9:1-2).³¹ Since these nations were utterly destroyed by Joshua, exclusivist post-exilic Jews should not use them in their attempt to expel these women from the Jewish community. According to Hoffman, *herem* was a notion deployed to mitigate concerns over legal ties with indigenous residents of Yehud against the use of Othering ethnic labels, since those Others, no longer exist.

³⁰ Mark Brett, “Genocide in Deuteronomy,” *Seeing Signals, Reading Signs: The Art of Exegesis*, ed. Mark A. O’Brien and Howard N. Wallace (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 75-89.

³¹ Yair Hoffman, “The Deuteronomistic Concept of the *Herem*,” *ZAW* 111, no. 2; 1999): 196-210.

Hoffman's view can be critiqued on a number of levels. Since Deuteronomy and Joshua are foundational for Israel's self-understanding and covenant relationship with God, their prohibitions against intermarriage and the stories of destruction do not help the cause of the Jews accused of intermarriage with woman compared to peoples under the *herem* ban. Even if these people groups were extinct, they, and the supposed current counterparts are utterly Othered by these texts. So to use them as ethnic slurs against the wives of Jews from Babylon would have a deleterious effect.³² In addition, the practices of these "foreigners" are only said to be "like" those of the Canaanites (Ezra 9:1). Nonetheless, Hoffman's point that what may have once been construed as relevant was now irrelevant must be taken. If such Othering was irrelevant then, as shown by the inclusive stories mentioned here and many others, how much more so now.

Whether historical or not, these *herem* passages textually express violence toward Others based on cultural identity and geography. This polarity lies in tension with expressions of Israel's role to function as priests to the world, to serve, love, and to bless others/Others, a manifestation of God's holiness that we call social holiness. As noted above, blessing the families of the land was the reason Abraham and Sarah were called apart. Out of love for the entire world, God sent his son (John 3:16-17). Furthermore, the Scriptures consistently insist that holiness means loving friends, strangers, and enemies alike (Lev 19:1-2, 34; 1 Kgs 18; 2 Kgs 5; Luke 25:10-37; Matt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; 1 Pet 1:15-16, and etc.). Since both *herem* and *qadosh* are associated with Othering, being set apart to the LORD (see again Lev 27:28-33) and yet are manifested so differently, should we tolerate the tension of ancient notions enfolded within timeless principles of compassion to strangers? Or should we set *herem*, aside while keeping *qadosh*?

Conclusions

³² Hoffman perceives a moral conflict between *herem* and Deuteronomy's call to love the stranger/alien (*ger*). But the resident alien of Deut is a worshipper of Yahweh and has settled into the community of Israel—they are assimilated. The treatment of the resident alien is a concern of Jer 7:6, Ezek 14:7 as well. Mark Brett finds Hoffman's argument useful, not in terms of composition, but of reception, wondering why Ezra 9-10 fails to mention women proselytes, such as Rahab of Jericho. Hoffman would say that story was written to counter and undermine Ezra's ideology of ethnicity construction (politics of identity) and any other attempts to be exclusive of outsiders who wished to join Israel and worship Israel's god. See Brett, "Genocide in Deuteronomy," 79.

These *herem* and expulsion passages are rife with theological meanings and hermeneutical implications that continue to be discussed in useful and useless ways.³³ In any case, these Scriptures clearly express an anti-Other stance that is based on some kind of reality in social or textual history—all texts emerge from a social context. They remain part of our Scriptures, even if Israel did not occupy all of the cities of Canaan mentioned in Joshua through bloody warfare,³⁴ or Joshua was written during the post-exilic period against Ezra 9:1-3 to indicate all of the traditional enemies of Israel were long gone,³⁵ or the husbands of “women of the land” preferred to expel Ezra over their wives and children.³⁶

Tension will always remain in the great library of the Scriptures, for we cannot change it now. Our task as receivers and interpreters of biblical traditions, of the Bible as living Scripture for living faith communities, is to be discerning and discriminating. Some perspectives must be set aside or interpreted as theological teachings for Israel and the Church about the dangers of turning from the God of deliverance and holiness.³⁷

Clearly, the biblical expressions of holiness *qadosh* for blessing and *herem* for destruction or ritual use are not equally relevant for God’s people.³⁸ *Herem*, as an ancient concept, must reasonably and righteously be confined to the past, as a notion from the era of ancient history, when certain things and people were considered off limits to humans, set apart

³³ Examples of useful expositions of Joshua and *herem* are: Frank Anthony Spina, “Rahab and Achan: Role Reversals,” in *The Faith of the Outsider*, 52-71; Nelson, “*Herem*”; Phillip D. Stern, *Biblical Herem: A Window on Israel’s Religious Experience* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); Karen Strand Winslow, “Mixed Marriage in Torah Narratives,” in *Mixed Marriages Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period*, ed. Christian Frevel (New York: T & T Clark International: *Series: Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, Volume 547*), 132-149.

³⁴ Some city states, such as Hazor show evidence of destruction in the 13th century B.C.E. (Josh 11:10-11); others, such as Jericho do not. See Amnon Ben-Tor, an excavator of Hazor, “Who Destroyed Hazor,” *B.A.R.* 39:4 (2013): 26-36; E. Theodore Mullen Jr, *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries*, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); idem, *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations*, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*, (New York: Free Press, 2001); W. G. Dever, *Who were the Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (New York: Eerdmans’s Young Readers, 2003); Norman K. Gottwald, “Religious Conversion and the Societal Origins of Ancient Israel,” in *Perspectives on the Hebrew Bible*, ed by James L. Crenshaw (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988), 49-66; Peter Machinist, “Outsiders or Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and Its Contexts,” in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. Laurence Silberstein and Robert Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 74-90.

³⁵ Hoffman, “The Deuteronomistic Concept of *Herem*,” 200-204.

³⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*. Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 200; idem, *Judaism: The First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 63-71; 80-84; 138-145.

³⁷ They were intended to be received this way by their producers and redactors who shaped the final form of the Bible.

³⁸ Lev 27:28-29; Num 18:14; Josh 6:19.

for the gods.³⁹ While *herem* was intended to “prevent any human benefit communal or individual, from taking place,”⁴⁰ *qadosh* marked people who should become righteous and just, benefiting other families of the world.

The context of the Deuteronomy-Joshua *herem* texts indicate their theological-*torah*-instructive nature to teach that just as outsiders to Israel can be under the ban, so also insiders can be expelled through disobedience. Likewise, outsiders such as Rahab and Gibeon—and indigenous Persian period women—can enter Israel, just as people of all nations are invited to worship Yahweh.⁴¹ The issue regarding exclusion or inclusion, we learn, is about faith, obedience, desire, and wits, not ethnicity.⁴²

We can and must affirm a two pronged holiness that includes: 1) behavioral boundaries that keep God’s people from assimilating and being lost as representatives of God’s ways; and 2) reaching out to embrace and serve Others, all others, both within and outside of faith communities. Furthermore, we can and must allow a rule of faith, a standard of interpretation, which we derive from the Bible to enervate texts about setting aside creatures of God’s world for destruction. In whatever ways we interpret them theologically, historically *herem* passages reflect a position—a notion, a superstition—that ancient Israel shared with other ancient peoples and re-presented in their texts.⁴³ In contrast, other texts from among the Scriptures show us the way of embrace without assimilation. As Luke’s Jesus so clearly demonstrated by his inaugural reading and interpretation in Nazareth, holiness means releasing captives, healing, and restoring sight to the blind of all of the people of the world.

³⁹ Both Nelson and Stern show that *herem* is the result of attempts to order out of chaos, to categorize various states that things could participate in or qualities they could take. As noted above, it coordinates with the state of holiness (Lev 27:28; Josh 6:19). Nelson, *Herem*, 40-41; Stern, *Biblical Herem*, 210-213; 218-226.

⁴⁰ Nelson, *Herem*, 46-48.

⁴¹ The most adept theological interpretation involves noticing how the Canaanite Others escaped from the ban of *herem* through faith and wits (Rahab and Gibeon). They “recognized” that Yahweh was life, health, and wisdom; something the Scriptures keep attempting to teach Israel! Furthermore, we learn from the books of Exodus and Numbers that Midianites could be assets or detriments to Israel, just as Israelites could remain aligned with the LORD or cut off. The consequence had nothing to do with ethnicity but rather with *behavior*, especially in regards to which gods they *ritually* allied themselves (see Num 25-31 and again the discussion in Winslow, *Early Jewish*, 88-97).

⁴² The book of Ruth is a narrative way to show the loyalty exhibited by a *Moabite* woman to Israel’s people and Israel’s God. In this manner, it joins the many outsider women stories in the Torah who help Israel.

⁴³ People who could/would have practiced *herem* would have had to have enough power and resources to do so. Israel shared the notion or concept of *herem*, but may not have actually practiced it. When Israel was in such a position during the monarchy, *herem* is not mentioned as resulting in destruction.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a *Jubilee* —an era of freedom!

I began this paper with Zaru’s statement: “Without truth telling there is no peacemaking.” This must be given its on-the-ground context: “Without truth telling there is no peacemaking. Can we have peace without self-determination and sovereignty? Without land and water that are essential for survival?”⁴⁴ Zaru speaks for me and, I hope, most interpreters when she writes: “Justice and compassion are the central themes as I read the scriptures. God is a God of justice and compassion, not a God of war, vengeance, and exclusivity.”⁴⁵

Holiness, justice, truth-telling, righteousness, and peacemaking are ordinary, practical, social, and relational. And they must endure. They pursue life— the surviving and thriving before the Lord of all the peoples of the world. God loved the whole world so much that he gave his son, the one with whom he was one, that whoever believes on him should not perish, but have life and forever *leolam* in the world to come.

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⁴⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁵ Zaru, 124.

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