A Brief Word Study on "Holy"

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a word study concerning the biblical term "holy" as found in Isa. 6.3: "And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’”¹ As a noun, "holy" appears some 39 times in Isaiah, indicating it is a significant term in this book. In particular, since Isaiah describes God as "Holy One of Israel" some twenty-five times, it would seem important to deepen one's grasp of this profound concept.²

Original Language Term and Etymology

The term "holy" in Isa. 6.3 is qâdōš [םָּדֶּש]. While examination of the etymology for qâdōš does not reveal any distinct compound words or unusual underlying concepts, a lexicon shows that the root meaning suggests an original idea of separation, withdrawal, rather than simply clean or pure.³

Range of Meanings

While the usage in Isa. 6.3 is an adjective, "holy", used to describe God, it may be helpful to widen one's view to encompass noun and verb forms of the same root to better appreciate the range of meaning.⁴ As a noun, holiness describes an attribute of God himself (Ex. 15.11), his word (Amos 4.2), his power (lit., arm, Is. 52.10), his name. When used as an attribute of God it may be synonymous with majesty. Words derived from this root may also be used to designate places or structures particularly reserved for divine activities (such as the tabernacle, a place of holiness or separateness from the profane, Ex. 25.8). Further, occasions in the calendar of religious events were also designated as "holy" (e.g., Sabbath, Ex. 16.23). As a verb, it describes the act of consecrating or dedicating persons (Ex. 29.21) or things (Ex. 28.38) for service to God. At times the route to becoming holy involves cleansing (2 Chron. 29.5, 17).

H. Sebass offers an important observation when he points out that, while "holy" contrasts what is "profane," we come closer to the significance of qâdōš when we grasp that it was by means of holy places, objects, and ceremonies that persons

⁴ Ibid., 871-73.
enter into relatively direct contact with the divine power….The basic idea is not that of separation…., but the positive thought of encounter [with a holy God] which inevitably demands certain modes of response.5

Thus the command, "You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19.2), is not so much a command for purity as an end in itself, but rather a requirement necessary if the people of God are to have communion or encounter with a God for whom holiness is an fundamental attribute.

**Best Meaning and Enriched Paraphrase**

It is difficult to improve on the fundamental translation "holy", unless one has become dulled to its profound significance. If so, one may substitute "sacred" or "pure and unmixed with anything unworthy". Particularly in the context of Isa. 6.3, the threefold usage of "holy" serves to locate God on an unimaginably lofty plane of purity, separated from anything that would detract from his goodness and power. As such I am impressed that whatever other traits God possesses (such as goodness and power), the fact that he is holy assures that these never become diluted with base motives, as so often happens with unholy humankind.

Drawing various insights from this study into the target verse (Isa. 6.3), one may paraphrase: "The Lord of hosts is unthinkably high above anything profane, the essence undiluted purity in every attribute he possesses." How amazing, then, that despite the fact that he dwells in a high and holy place, he who inhabits eternity also consents to dwell with those who are humble and contrite in spirit (Isa. 57.15).

**Suggestions**

You will want to consult other dictionaries, articles, using resources such as:


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