

What does Isaiah mean by “holy”?

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There are texts that are very familiar to Jews and Christians alike because of their regular use in religious services. One example is the sentence: *'kadosh kadosh kadosh Adonai tzevaot m'lo chol ha'aretz k'vodo'*, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' It actually comes from chapter 6 of the Biblical Book of Isaiah. The prophet has a vision while standing in the Temple. He sees God, seated like a king on a raised throne while the skirts of the king's garment fill the Temple. Standing around God are fiery heavenly beings, in Hebrew *'seraphim'*, and they are singing praises to God, using this sentence. There is a Jewish tradition that during the service when we chant the threefold *'kadosh, kadosh, kadosh'* we rise on our toes as if trying to join with that heavenly choir.

Though the sentence is familiar, there are questions to be asked about what it means, especially if we only know it in translation. For example, what does the English word 'holy' mean, and is it an appropriate translation of the Hebrew *'kadosh'*? Its origins can be traced back to 11th century words found in Saxon and related languages which mean 'whole', in the sense of 'complete', 'uninjured'. In the 14th century it appears in Wycliffe's English translation of the Bible as the word 'holy', understood as 'sacred', 'consecrated', 'venerated', 'godly'. However the Hebrew *'kadosh'* means something like, 'set apart for a purpose', 'other', 'different', 'separate'. When God invites the Jewish people to share this same divine quality, God says to them: *'kedoshim tihyu ki kadosh ani adonai eloheichem'*, 'As a people, you shall be separate, set apart from other peoples, just as I, the Eternal your God, am set apart.' (Leviticus 19:2) (In the light of the impact of the Corona Virus it is hard to resist the temptation to translate the beginning of that verse, *'kedoshim tihyu'* instead as 'you shall collectively isolate yourselves!')

In Isaiah's vision it is not sufficient for the *seraphim* merely to say that God is *'kadosh'*, 'other', 'different'. Nor is simply repeating the word twice enough. Only a third repetition, *'kadosh, kadosh, kadosh'*, begins to express how that 'otherness' of God is even more and more separate from any human reality. Only that threefold repetition can begin to express how God is beyond knowing, beyond understanding, even beyond human encounter. In this poetic form it asserts that God cannot be contained in any concept, experience or imagining that human beings can express. In today's theological language we would define this 'otherness' of God by the term 'transcendence'.

But that is only the first half of the sentence of the *seraphim*, because this otherness of God is immediately contrasted in the second part: *'m'lo chol – ha'aretz k'vodo'*, 'the whole earth is full of God's *kavod*'. Again, we are not always helped by our translations. The conventional English translation of *'kavod'* is 'glory'. This time the word comes from Latin and old French *'gloria'*, which means 'fame', 'renown', 'praise'. Yet the Hebrew root of the word *'kavod'* speaks about 'weight', 'heaviness', 'physicality', 'presence'. *'kavod'* applies to whatever gives someone or something weight in the eyes of others. God's presence is so 'weighty', that there is no space that it does not fill, no place on earth where God's presence cannot be experienced. Again, to use a theological term, we are describing God's 'immanence'. In effect this apparently simple sentence of the *seraphim* contains the great religious paradox that God is both unknowable and

unreachable, yet, at the same time, almost physically present in the world. The terms 'transcendent' and 'immanent' make deliberate distinctions between these two aspects of the divine. They define them as oppositions, but Isaiah's words hold these two realities within a single sentence, intimately tied to one another. God's apparent distance is forever bound to God's intimate presence in the world. But at the same time, God's nearness can never be completely defined, or contained or taken for granted.

This imagery of God's simultaneous distance and nearness is further reinforced in the first four verses of the chapter. The key is the Hebrew word '*malei*' which means 'to fill'. Verse one describes God's throne as being raised up, set apart on high, yet the skirts of God's robe 'fill' the Temple, just as God's *kavod* fills the earth. And in verse four the outer walls of the building shake, but now the building is once again 'filled', but this time with smoke. Like the threefold *kadosh*, the three repetitions of the verb *malei*, 'fill', reinforce the same theme: of God's otherness yet closeness, distant yet also present, remote yet intimately near.

Having set this scene Isaiah raises the question: how can any human being, even a prophet, build a bridge between these two separate domains, the heavenly and the earthly. He describes his dread at standing directly in the presence of God. For he is merely an impure human being, whose very lips are impure. As if to reinforce his inadequacy, he describes himself as living amongst an entire people of unclean lips. And yet the apparent solution is at hand, aided by using the Temple imagery. Now he is standing in the court where the priests officiate and burn incense. In his vision, one of the *seraphim*, using a pair of tongs, takes a hot coal from the incense altar and touches it to Isaiah's lips, thus purifying them. The use of the tongs dramatizes the need of the pure *seraph* to distance itself from the impurity of the human being.

Now, for the first time, Isaiah has access to the heavenly domain. He stands unharmed in the presence of God, and can address God directly and hear the message that he is to bring to the people. But what he hears is shocking. Whatever he says will make no difference, instead it will reinforce the unwillingness of the people to obey God's will.

Go and say to this people: 'Hear and keep on hearing, but do not understand, see and keep on seeing, but do not comprehend. Make fat the heart of this people, make their ears 'heavy' and seal their eyes, lest seeing with their eyes, and hearing with their ears, and understanding with their heart they repent and heal themselves.' (vv 9-10)

The very senses of hearing and seeing that the prophet has now acquired will be those which will stand in the way of the people. Without the kind of purification that the prophet has had to undergo, the people will never accept the divine word. It is as if by entering the divine domain, he is now effectively closed off from his own world. Isaiah dramatizes the tragic fate of the Biblical prophet, the closer he or she comes to God's word, the harder it is to communicate with the very people who need his message.

I want to step back from the seeming hopelessness of the picture that Isaiah has drawn, of the inherent impossibility of prophecy. Because this chapter, exquisitely crafted, is itself a rhetorical act. By expressing so forcefully the very impossibility of people accepting the message that he brings, Isaiah is also challenging them to do the exact opposite, to open their hearts, eyes and ears and turn and repent with the promise of healing. It is an example of a kind of psychological trick, that of 'paradoxical intention'.¹ Awed by the prophet's experience and his narrative skill, and the dread hopelessness that he evokes, surely some will get the message and change.

¹ I first came across the term in the writings of Viktor Frankl. But it is apparently well known in Germany as the Nordfriesische Schweineschwanz Methode – whereby, to get a pig to get onto a truck, you pull the tail and it leaps ahead.

In our Bible Week we pay very close attention to the details of the Hebrew text. I want to show one further literary device used by Isaiah. The chapter is divided into three parts, verses 1-4 take place within the innermost part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. The encounter with the *seraph* is in the chamber where the priests would function, and here the *seraph* and the prophet can meet (verses 5-8). The third section (verses 9-13) deals with the world outside, the land that will become desolate, because God has exiled the people from it. Nevertheless, the very end speaks of a small seed of holiness, a *zera kodesh*, a stump from which a new beginning may emerge.

In each of the three sections the name of God appears twice but it is written in one of two different ways. One variation is the familiar, but unpronounceable YHWH (*yod hey vav hey*), which Jewish tradition forbids us to say aloud so that we substitute for it the word '*Adonai*'. But the other way in which the name is written in this chapter is that actual consonantal form '*Adonai*', (*aleph daled nun yod*). Both of these forms appear in each of the three sections of the chapter, and they are used in significantly different ways. The consonantal form appears where Isaiah actually sees God (v 1) or hears God (v 8) or directly addresses God (v 11). That is to say, it stands for the immanent God whom the prophet can see, hear and address. But the tetragrammaton is used to designate God as the transcendent being. Twice it is used in the combined form 'Lord of hosts', signifying the heavenly hosts that serve God (vv 3, 5). The third time it stands alone but speaks of God's actions in the world, emptying the land of its people. So once again the transcendent and the immanent are juxtaposed with one another throughout the entire chapter, God is at once intimate and utterly distant and remote.

I am constantly astonished at the sophistication of Isaiah's literary skills and the subtlety of his theological expression. If we accept his understanding, he leaves us with the challenge of building our own bridge between these two domains, these two potential experiences of God, and also finding for ourselves the unity, the Oneness, that lies behind them.