

Every year on *Yom Kippur* we read these inspiring words from Leviticus 19: “You shall be holy for I, your God, am holy.” Some people point to this verse and argue that striving to be holy is at the very core of what it means to be Jewish. But what, exactly, does it mean to be holy? Although we throw the word around casually today, I believe we have lost a concrete sense of holiness – what does it look like, how does one achieve it, can it be lost? And so, the best way to gain a more tangible understanding of holiness is to return to our primary source – the Bible.

The Bible is full of holiness. In fact, the Hebrew root which forms the word ‘holy’ (קדש) appears nearly 900 times, conveying a range of ideas. Every place we read about holiness helps us define its original meaning better, and one notable example is in the Book of Hosea.



IS GOD ALWAYS HOLY?

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GENRE

Scholars analyze ancient writings by comparing them with similar texts. When we place a narrative into a particular genre, it helps us to understand the theme of the writing and what sort of response it may have been intended to evoke. Hosea 11 presents a challenge, though, as it imprecisely mimics a number of different biblical styles.

One school of thought believes this section of Hosea chronicles, essentially, legal proceedings against a rebellious son.ⁱ If so, by the time ancient readers got to verses 8 and 9, they would have known exactly what was coming. “Strictly speaking,” says Beeby, “there should be no real story here, only the report of a common court case and the inevitable execution.”ⁱⁱ The obvious problem, of course, is that the end of the story does not conform to expectations. The son is not punished, which means that this may not be a typical court case, after all.

Another set of scholars places Hosea 11 within a genre called Announcement of Salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ But there is a qualitative difference between saving Israel from her enemies and saving Israel from potential destruction at God’s own hands. The latter is more pardon than salvation, and it requires a different sort of explanation.

THE STORY

Hosea 11 presents a brief history of God’s relationship with the people Israel. It describes how God has loved Israel as a child, but since the exodus from Egypt, the child has gone his own way by sacrificing to other gods. In apparent anger, God declares that “Because they refuse to repent, a sword shall descend upon their towns and consume their limbs... for my people persists in its defection from Me” (Hosea 11:5-7). Verses 8 and 9, however, offer a twist, as God does not destroy Israel for her insolence, after all. The question is, why?

Unfortunately, the scholars who offer these standard interpretations miss the subtle, subversive, perhaps surprising, theological message, which is hidden near the end of chapter 11. In vv. 8-9 God is neither judging Israel nor saving Israel, but is powerless to do either! God is, as we shall see, bound by being “in your presence,” which alters the very nature of God. God’s holiness in these verses, derived from and dependent upon Israel’s presence, will not allow the active destruction of Israel.

TRANSLATION

It is never easy to give a perfect rendition of Hebrew text, and in this case the translation can give a very different impression of the prophet’s meaning. My interpretation of vv. 8-9 offers crucial differences from a typical translation, especially the end of verse 9:

11:8 – *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I give you up like Admah,^{iv} treat you like Zeboim? My heart has turned on me^v, my comfort and compassion have grown warm and tender together.*

11:9 – *I will not act on my fierce anger, I cannot change^{vi} in order to destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man. In your presence I am Holy^{vii}, unable^{viii} to come (to you) enraged.*

Every standard translation offers a variation of “I will not destroy Israel because I am God and not man, the Holy One in your presence.” Holiness here is generally interpreted by commentators as an analogy or metaphor for God’s presence. But is it possible that the text actually means what it says? God’s holiness – meaning a specific *attribute* of God – is present within Israel. For Hosea, it is not that God is holy or not holy, nor is it that Israel is holy or not holy; rather, when you put God and Israel together, the outcome is holiness.

ANALYSIS

If we are to gain a greater understanding of God in the context of Hosea, it is important that we ask the right question: Why did God change God’s mind and fail to execute the appropriate punishment against Israel?

LOVE

Wolff sums up the scholarly position when he argues that *love* “proves to be the incom-

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parable holy essence of God himself.”^{ix} And while I agree that love is an important element in the God-Israel relationship, I reject the portrayal of love as its defining feature.

If vv. 8-9 hold the key to understanding why God does not follow through with the appropriate punishment of Israel, the word ‘love’ is conspicuously missing.^x Instead, it is holiness that suffuses these verses and answers our question. According to Hosea, God is actually defined by Israel and, shockingly, God’s holiness is apparent only when in the presence of Israel. How do we know?

ADMAH/ZOBOIM

There are several elements in Hosea which hint at holiness, rather than love, as the key to understanding these verses. Perhaps the most convincing is the mention of the cities *Admah* and *Zeboim*, which are used essentially as synonyms for Sodom and Gemorrah. Although this is a thinly-veiled reference to God’s destruction of those cities in Genesis, the difference is that there is no mention of ‘holy’ in any rendition of the Sodom story. They were not simply destroyed due to their wickedness, they were destroyed by an absence of God’s holiness. So how can we explain one situation where a not-specifically-holy God destroys and another situation where a specifically-holy God does not destroy?

IN YOUR MIDST (PRESENCE)

Most interpretations assume that this phrase indicates somehow that God, the Holy One, is in the midst of Israel as the decision not to destroy them is made. Although this is true, a careful look at the structure of this phrase indicates something more. Grammatically, the text does not say that God is holy *and* in your (meaning Israel’s) presence. Instead, it says that God is holy in your presence. This minor difference tells us that, in this context, holiness is inherently tied to God being in the presence of Israel.

HOLINESS

In Hosea God simply cannot swoop down and devastate Israel. Once God arrives in Israel’s presence, God’s very nature is changed – to holy – and God is unable to follow through with that vengeful act. The text makes it exceedingly clear that the attribute

which distinguishes God from humanity is God’s holiness. I believe that commentators across the board misuse or misapply the term ‘holy,’ which leads to mistaken conclusions.

Mays, in a typical example, argues that, “‘Holy’ is a synonym for God; it indicates the numinous and dynamic, the *mysterium tremendum*, the incomparable awesome force of the divine.”^{xi} But the word *Kadosh* appears 28 times in the Prophets. Most often, *Kadosh* is paired with *Yisrael* to make a title for God (‘Holy One of Israel’). The word *Kadosh* alone occurs only six times, and only once in the entire prophetic writings, in Isaiah 40:25, does it appear to be a noun meaning something akin to ‘the Holy One.’ It is extremely rare, and terribly out of character, for the prophets to use the word *Kadosh* to refer to God rather than to speak about God. *Kadosh* is a descriptive term, which means that our passage in Hosea 11 *cannot* be read as ‘the Holy One in your midst.’

Instead, it would seem that God is revealing a vital piece of information through Hosea. *B’kir’b’cha Kadosh* must mean, ‘in your presence, I am holy.’ Within the context of Hosea, God is holy – specifically and only in the presence of Israel!

In order to confirm this reading, we must ask, when was God not ‘in the midst’ of Israel? The answer, cleverly suggested by Hosea 11:8, is during the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah. Remember, these were foreign cities, and God brutally destroyed them in a fashion that could hardly be called ‘holy.’ Since God was not in Israel’s presence, as in the Hosea text, God was free to act in any manner – even in an ‘unholy’ way.

Many commentators agree that these verses in Hosea 11 are vital to our understanding of God and the Bible. Beeby makes perhaps the grandest statement, saying “I am confident that here we penetrate deeper into the heart and mind of God than anywhere else in the Old Testament.”^{xii} Unfortunately, these scholars fail to draw their conclusions about God from the text and instead fall into previous patterns that fit with their preconceived notions vis-à-vis God’s relationship with Israel.

Hosea was not defining a relationship as much as he was defining God! In the end,

Hosea is gently suggesting that holiness is not an inherent state for God. Instead, when we join together with God in partnership, our connection creates holiness. ■

- ⁱ Wolff and Daniels, among others, base this determination on the regulations regarding rebellious sons in Deuteronomy 21:18-21, which instruct that “on the accusation of a son by his parents, the city elders shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.”
- ⁱⁱ Beeby, H.D. *Grace Abounding*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989, p. 142.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Yee and Emerson, for examples.
- ^{iv} Deuteronomy 29:23 mentions *Admah* and *Ziboim* as two cities that were destroyed along with Sodom and Gemorrah, though they are not mentioned in the original story in Genesis.
- ^v While an idiom such as ‘I have had a change of heart’ may be appropriate, I find a closer translation to be more powerful as it conveys a sense that God does not have control of this change.
- ^{vi} Many commentators offer ‘again’ here, but God has not yet destroyed Israel! The remainder almost all offer ‘return’ as a literal translation. But I am convinced by Schungel-Straumann (Helen. “God as Mother in Hosea 11” cited in Brenner, Athalya, ed. *A Feminist Companion to The Latter Prophets*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), who argues that *Ashuv* refers to the previous verse, where God announced the intention not to give up on Israel. And so God’s ‘return’ in this case would be to change God’s mind about that decision. Further, ‘cannot’ will lead nicely into the idea that God is fundamentally different in Israel’s presence – a difference that even God may not be able to control.
- ^{vii} This phrase contains the meaning of the entire verse, and will be fully explicated in this paper.
- ^{viii} This is a slight departure from the text, which seems to only say that God will not come while enraged. However, given the immediately preceding statement, that God is holy in the presence of Israel, I would argue that the latter statement implies that God must be holy in that situation, and is unable to be otherwise.
- ^{ix} Wolff, H.H. *Hosea*. Fortress, 1974 (German ed. 1965), p. 203.
- ^x I realize that love is a tempting conclusion to draw from Hosea 11:8-9, based on the preceding verses. However, it seems to me that much of this scholarship has been influenced by Christian ideas, which have developed over time into an article of faith, even in the scholarly arena. Almost every commentator I read viewed this passage as laying the groundwork for the eventual message of the New Testament; namely, that God’s love is the *raison d’être* and supreme expression of our relationship with God. And while God’s love is certainly a powerful Jewish concept, I do not believe it is the fundamental building block of our faith. This passage provides no less than a fundamental understanding of God and our relationship with God. In a Jewish sense, the bottom line is not love, but holiness.
- ^{xi} Mays, James Luther. *Hosea: A Commentary*. The Westminster Press, 1969, p. 158.
- ^{xii} Beeby, p. 140.