

HOLINESS A quality that characterizes deity and at times humans and/or objects. The precise nature of this quality is disputed.

Introduction

This article explores the concept of holiness in the Bible and other ancient literature and surveys the issues that arise in the attempt to determine a precise understanding of the language of holiness in the Bible.

The English terms “holy” and “holiness” communicate ideas in the modern Western world that may not align with the usage of these terms in the Bible. As a result of these Western presuppositions for “holiness,” scholarship has long sought a more precise understanding of what exactly “holy” means in the Bible. This article surveys two major issues involved in discerning the biblical meaning of “holiness”:

1. It provides a portrait of holiness language in the ancient world in which the Bible was composed.
2. It surveys the range of theories and methodologies proposed for what exactly holiness is in the Bible.

The Language of Holiness in the Bible

The English terms “holy” and “holiness” translate the biblical Hebrew word group *qdash*, which includes the following terms:

- *qdash* (*qdash*), meaning “it is holy”
- *qodesh* (*qodesh*), referring to something “holy”
- *qadesh* (*qadesh*), which can serve as a place name, such as “sanctuary,” or refer to an individual dedicated to prostitution
- *qadwsh* (*qadwsh*), meaning “holy”
- *miqdash* (*miqdash*), meaning “sanctuary”

The Septuagint usually translates the Hebrew terms for “holy” with some form of the *hag* (*hag*)-root. Thus, wherever the Hebrew Bible uses the *qdash* (*qdash*) word group, the Septuagint uses Greek terms like “holy” (*hagios*, *hagios*) or “to be holy” (*hagiazēin*, *hagiazēin*). The New Testament also uses the *hag* (*hag*)-root to communicate the concept of holiness, especially when referencing the Old Testament background. Since the New Testament depends on the language of holiness in the Old Testament, most holiness scholarship has primarily focused on the Old Testament. Consequently, it is important to examine the ancient Near Eastern background of biblical holiness by looking at the literature of the ancient world.

The Language of Holiness in the Ancient World

A broad survey of literature from the ancient world suggests that the people of the ancient Near East developed the language of holiness to express membership and proximity to the realm of the divine. Ancient Near Eastern texts generally use the language of holiness in the

sense of “consecration,” referring to the dedication of a person or object to a deity. The sense of moral purity or perfection is absent from this context.

The western ancient world, seen in Greek literature, seems to borrow the concept of holiness from the ancient Near East. Some scholars have suggested that the ancient conception of holiness as “membership or belonging to the divine” is also depicted in the Bible via the קִדְּשׁ (*qdsh*) and הַג (*hag*)- word groups in the Old Testament and New Testament.

Mesopotamian Literature

Sumerian. In Sumerian literature, the cuneiform sign “*KU₃*” represents “holy.” Using a philological approach, Wilson has argued that this Sumerian term for “holy” is best defined as “pertaining/belonging to the realm of the divine” (Wilson, “*Holiness*” and “*Purity*,” 17).

Sumerian literature uses the term “holy” (*KU₃*) in reference to:

- holy places like temples or items belonging to a temple (compare the usage of “holy” in Exodus and Leviticus in reference to the tabernacle and its objects)
- the dwelling places of some of the gods, which are sometimes referred to as a “holy mountain” (*DU₆.KU₃*; see Borger, “Das dritte ‘Hause’ der Serie *bīt rimki*”)
- Items belonging to deities, such as a ship belonging to the god Nanna (see Falkenstein and von Soden, *Sumerische und akkadische Hymne und Gebete*, 79).

Sumerian texts also contain multiple descriptions of other objects, rituals, sacred acts, and even non-tangible items as “holy” (such as the important Sumerian concept of “*me*”; Rosengarten, *Sumer et le sacré*, 193).

Reiner has suggested that the Sumerian term for “holy” is interchangeable with the Sumerian term for “pure” (*SIKIL*). Accordingly, Reiner translates *KU₃* as “pure” in an incantation of a priest: “I am a pure man” (*LU₂.KU₃.GA*, from Reiner, *Šurpu*, tablet 1, line 4). However, Wilson objects, arguing that this does not fit the distinct usage of “holy” (*KU₃*) and “pure” (*SIKIL*) in other Sumerian texts. He argues instead that the priest states, “I am a holy man,” referring to his citizenship in the divine realm (Wilson, “*Holiness*” and “*Purity*,” 32n88, 40–41). In Wilson’s view, although many people today use the terms “holiness” and “purity” interchangeably, people in the ancient Near East distinguished between these terms. Rosengarten similarly argues that “holy” and “pure” are not synonyms in Sumerian and should not be treated as such in English translations (Rosengarten, *Sumer et le sacré*, 193). This may suggest the Hebrew terms for “holy” and “pure” in the Bible also should not be treated as synonyms.

Akkadian. Akkadian texts regularly use the *q-d-š* word group (a lexical cognate of Hebrew קִדְּשׁ , *qdsh*) to communicate the concept of holiness (for an overview of the Akkadian lexemes involved, see Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*, 33–55). The language of holiness is especially prevalent in religious texts for the dedication of an object, offering, or person to a deity (contra Naudé, s.v. “ קִדְּשׁ , *qdsh*,” who appears to misunderstand the Akkadian data; additionally, he examines only two of at least five possible lexemes in the *q-d-š* word group). Akkadian texts describe temples as “consecrated” or “holy” since they are identified with the presence of a deity. For instance, a Neo-Babylonian inscription uses a lexeme of *q-d-š* in speaking of the dedication of a temple to the god Bunene: “I rebuilt and made holy

(*uqaddišma*) the temple of Bunene with a tebibtu-ritual ... for Bunene, my lord” (for the Akkadian text see Langdon, *Die neubabylonischen königsinschriften*, 232, 1:30–32; compare the use of Hiphil-stem of ׁוֹדֵשׁ , *qdsh*; in 1 Kgs 9:3 in reference to the temple building).

In addition to objects and persons, Akkadian texts also often use the *q-d-š* lexemes to describe a deity as “holy,” as with the phrase “all the holy (*qašdūtum*) gods of the mountain” (see Oppenheim et al., *CAD Q 146b*). Context rarely clarifies the precise meaning of “holy” in such cases. However, the term seems to reflect the realm of the divine. Mesopotamian references to a “holy deity” most likely do not refer to a moral quality, as the ancient readers rarely depict their Mesopotamian deities as morally pure (e.g., Inanna). Wilson suggests some Mesopotamian texts describe their gods as “holy” to emphasize that even the most “scandalous gods” belong to the realm of the divine (Wilson, “*Holiness*” and “*Purity*,” 52–53).

Akkadian texts also use the *q-d-š* lexemes to describe the purification of an object in order to present it to deity, all of which is subsumed under the idea of dedication. At times, the nominal cognates are paired with the term meaning “clean” or “pure” (*ellu*), which communicates that the holy items have a new ritual status when they belong to a deity (see *CAD E 102*; Wilson, “*Holiness*” and “*Purity*,” 67–83). Costecalde has argued that in such instances, the Akkadian *q-d-š* word group is not intended to emphasize separation from the profane (a negative image), but rather consecration toward something—that it now belongs to the realm of the divine (a positive image). In other words, the Akkadian examples suggest that separation is a natural result of the object or person being made holy for a deity, not a primary act of the *q-d-š* word group itself (Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*, 55; for lexical examples, see Akkadian *qadašu* [*CAD Q 46*], *qašdu* [*CAD Q 146*], *quddušu* [*CAD Q 294*], *quššudu* [*CAD Q 320*], and *qadištu* [*CAD Q 48*]).

Ugaritic and Northwest Semitic Inscriptions

Ugaritic. Ugaritic texts use the term *qdš* to communicate the concept of holiness (see Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*, 57–72). Its forms appear primarily in religious and mythological contexts, although some administrative and ritual texts also contain examples (see de Tarragon, *Le Culte à Ugarit*, 73–74). Similar to the Mesopotamian texts, Ugaritic texts use the terms for holiness in conjunction with membership, identifying something that belongs to deity. Essentially everything that is in the vicinity of deity is designated as “holy” (*qdš*). For example:

- a cup belonging to the gods is a “a holy cup” (*ks qdš*; see Dietrich et al., *KTU 1.3 I 13*; 1.16 I 7).
- the mountain where Ba’lu (compare Baal in the Bible) dwells is “a holy place”: “Come and I / myself will explain it in the midst of my mountain, the Divine Zaphon, / on the holy place, on the mountain of my possession” (see *KTU 1.3 III 28b–30*; see also *KTU 1.16 I 6–8*; II 45–46; Sumerian texts and the Bible have similar language, e.g., Pss 2:6; 15:1; Isa 32:19; Zeph 3:11). In this case, the term “holy place” is expanded as “mountain of my possession.” The mountain is described as “holy” because it belongs to the divine realm.
- the voice of Ba’lu (or Baal) is “his holy voice,” (*qlh qdš*; *KTU 1.4 VII 29*)

As in Akkadian texts, Ugaritic texts also refer to deities themselves as “holy.” For example, some deities have the title “Holy One” (*KTU* 1.16 I 11, 22) or “Son(s) of the Holy One” (*KTU* 1.2 I 21, 38; compare similar language for Yahweh in Isaiah). The abundance of Ugaritic descriptions of objects, offerings, persons, and deities as “holy” seems to suggest that the Ugaritic term for “holy” actually means “consecration,” indicating a sense of belonging to a group or deity (Costecalde, *Aux origins du sacré biblique*, 72). There are no examples from Ugaritic texts of “holy” referring to a moral quality. This appears to closely parallel the language of holiness in Sumerian and Akkadian texts, and in Costecalde’s view, it may also parallel the language of holiness in the Bible (Costecalde, *Aux origins du sacré biblique*, 137–40).

Northwest Semitic. We have fewer examples of Northwest Semitic texts than Ugaritic texts. However, the extant Northwest Semitic inscriptions (e.g., Phoenician-Punic, Hebrew, Aramaic) exhibit a similar usage of holiness language to that of the Ugaritic material (so Costecalde, *Aux origins du sacré biblique*, 73–82). Northwest Semitic inscriptions describe dedicated objects such as cultic bowls and utensils, graves, and altars as “holy” (*qdš*). Most objects are devoted to deities, but some, such as burial graves, are given as gifts to people. Northwest Semitic inscriptions also use the nominal form of *qdš(m)* for sanctuaries for deities. They often communicate the sense of membership by using a verb form (“to make holy”) plus a preposition (“to, for”; *qdš + l*) to indicate making something “holy” to or for a deity or person (e.g., Donner and Röllig, *KAI*, 43:9, 14; 138:1). This syntactic feature of the root also appears in biblical Hebrew. The pairing of the preposition “to” or “for” (*l*) with a form of “to be holy” (*qdš*) may indicate a positive image of consecration rather than a negative image of separation (of which we would expect “to make holy” + “from” [*qdš+ mn*], a feature that does not seem to be paired with the *qdš* word group in inscriptions).

Greek

The semantic equivalent of the ancient Near Eastern language of holiness in Greek literature seems to have arrived chiefly through the growth of the Septuagint. Earlier non-biblical Greek texts contain few examples of the concept of holiness (see above and Procksch, “ἅγιος, *hagios*,” 89). The limited instances of “holy” (ἅγιος, *hagios*) in non-Jewish, non-Christian literature describe items and people who are devoted to deities, paralleling ancient Near Eastern usage (see Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. ἅγιος, *hagios*). For instance, Herodotus, *Histories* 2.41, 44 refers to the temple of Aphrodite and Heracles as “holy” (ἅγιος, *hagios*; see also Herodotus, *Histories* 5.119). The verb “to be holy” (ἁγιάζειν, *hagiazein*) also appears infrequently in Greek literature outside of Jewish and Christian texts. The verb is related to the Greek term that seems to mean “hallow” or “to make sacred” (ἁγίζω, *hagizō*; see Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. ἁγίζω, *hagizō*). Thus, it appears that the concept of holiness came to the western ancient world by way of ancient Near Eastern religion, particularly the language of holiness in the Old Testament.

The New Testament’s terminology and meaning of holiness is directly dependent upon the Old Testament’s conception of holiness. Many English translations of the New Testament also use the English terms “holy” or “holiness” to translate Greek terms outside of the typical ἅγ (*hag*)- word group. For instance, the ESV, NASB, KJV, and NIV render the Greek term ὅσιος (*hosios*) in Heb 7:26 as “holy” (see also e.g., Titus 1:8; Rev 15:4). The Septuagint never uses

ἁγιος (*hosios*) to translate the Hebrew term “holy” (קָדוֹשׁ, *qadosh*). This term, among others, semantically represents religious ideas that are different from the language of “holiness” as seen in the קִדְשׁ (*qdash*) and ἅγ (*hag*)- word groups of the Old and New Testaments (Hodgson, “Holiness [NT],” 249). Hauck suggests that ἁγιος (*hosios*) and its cognates likely deals more with acts that are lawful, pious, or fulfilling one’s duty (see Hauck, “ἁγιος, *hosios*,” 489–93). Consequently, it might be best not to translate ἁγιος (*hosios*) as “holy.”

Approaches to Understanding Holiness in the Bible

The precise meaning of the terms “holy” or “holiness” in the Bible is debated. Scholars throughout history have used various methodologies to reach different conclusions regarding the precise definition of holiness in the Bible (Laube, “Heiligkeit IV,” 708–09). For example:

- The traditional approach relied on etymology and concluded that holiness in the Bible refers to separation or moral purity (see Alexander, *From Paradise*; Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; Eichrodt, *Theology*; Neusner, *Idea of Purity*; Rucker, *Die Begründungen*).
- Anthropologists and other socio-historical scientists have examined holiness within the broader milieu of primitive religion and defined it as “transcendence.” As a result, many nuances for holiness have appeared as sociologists, anthropologists, and theologians emphasize one aspect of holiness over another in their cultural studies (see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*; Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*; Hänel, *Die Religion der Heiligkeit*; Miller, *Religion*; Müller, “*qdš*”; Otto, *Idea of the Holy*; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*; Söderblom, “Holiness”; Sproul, *The Holiness of God*).
- Source-critics have argued that the different textual sources within the Bible offer competing definitions of holiness (see Knohl, *Sanctuary of Silence*; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*; “Changing Concept”; “Rationale”; Miller, *Religion*; Regev, “Priestly Dynamic Holiness”; Wright, “Holiness (OT)”; “Holiness in Leviticus”).
- Hartley, Levine, and Milgrom used a broader approach that views God’s entire character as representing holiness (see Hartley, *Leviticus*; Levine, “The Language of Holiness”; *Leviticus*; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*; “Changing Concept”; “Rationale”).
- The philological-contextual approach advocates for discerning the meaning of “holy” from the occurrences of the words in context (see Jensen, *Graded Holiness*; Wilson, “*Holiness and Purity*”). Some have coupled this with a comparative approach to examine how the biblical data fits with the language of holiness in the ancient world. This philological-contextual approach has concluded that holiness indicates a belongingness or membership within the divine realm (see Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*; Gentry, “No One Holy,” 17–38).

The growth of knowledge about the literature and language of the ancient world has also fundamentally changed our understanding of biblical religion—possibly including the biblical concept of holiness. The following paragraphs provide further detail about the different views regarding biblical “holiness” and the corresponding methodologies scholars have used to determine the precise meaning of “holy” and “holiness” in the Bible.

Holiness as Separation and/or Moral Purity

Based largely on historical tradition and Baudissin's work "Der Begriff der Heiligkeit im AT," traditional scholarship viewed the Hebrew term "holy" (קֹדֶשׁ, *qdsh*) as derived from the term meaning "to cut" or "to separate" (*qd*) and thus assigned it the meaning "separateness" (e.g., Rücker, *Die Begründungen der Weisungen Jahwes im Pentateuch*, 79). This usage appears as early as the medieval period, when the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi suggested that the command to be holy as God is holy in Lev 19:2 means "to separate." In the early 20th century, Durkheim argued that "the holy" meant "set apart and forbidden" (see Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 47). In the mid-20th century, Eichrodt also argued that holiness was separation from something, such as sin or impurities (Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:270). More recently, Hartley and Hoffmeier (referring to Egyptian religion) have maintained that "separation" is the primary definition of "holiness" or the sacred (see Hartley, *Leviticus*, lix; Hoffmeier, *"Sacred" in the Vocabulary of Ancient Egypt*).

Those who ascribe to the traditional view of holiness as separation often equate holiness with a kind of ethical and moral purity. Alexander describes God's holiness as "the moral perfection and purity of God's nature" (Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 244). Similarly, Neusner advocates that "holy" (קֹדֶשׁ, *qdsh*) and "pure" (טָהוֹר, *thr*) should be treated as synonyms (Neusner, *The Idea of Purity*, 18). Smith's 19th century study of primitive religions may have contributed to this trend, as he concluded that the concept of "holiness" evolved from societal taboos that may have later provided the conceptual synonymy between "purity" and "holiness" (Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 153–54; on the linkage of power, taboo, and holiness, see Miller, *Religion of Ancient Israel*, 132–34). Other anthropological sources contributed to this view by equating holiness with an absence of pollution. Douglas argues that early religions show the basic category of holiness as involving the opposite of pollution. She thus suggests that holiness began as "separateness" and then evolved into the idea of perfection (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50). Conceptually, most anthropologists came to equate holiness with purity (for a survey and critique of Douglas's anthropological models of holiness and purity, see Houston, *Purity and Monotheism*, 68–123).

Scholars such as Jensen, Gentry, Lasine, and Propp have challenged the traditional view that the biblical terms "holy" and "holiness" indicate "separation" or "to set apart." Such scholars believe the accuracy of the proposed etymology behind "holy" (קֹדֶשׁ, *qdsh*), upon which the traditional view is based, remains uncertain. Jensen contends that the etymological view of "separation" is now obsolete and should be abandoned entirely (Jensen, *Graded Holiness*, 48n4; see also Gentry, "No One Holy," 17–38; Lasine, "Everything Belongs to Me," 31–62; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*). This reflects modern scholarship's hesitancy to determine a term's meaning by its etymology; instead, many modern scholars rely on context to determine meaning (see Silva, *Biblical Words*, 35–51).

Cazelles and Costelcade used a philological-contextual method, in which they examined the context of every occurrence of "holy" (קֹדֶשׁ, *qdsh*) in the Bible, and determined that "separation" is not the primary focus of holiness (Cazelles and Costelcade, "Sacré," 1393–1415). Costelcade also notes that the textual data from the ancient Near East (surveyed above) casts further doubt on equating "holiness" with "separation" or "moral purity" (so Costelcade, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*). Wilson has warned that the Western religious tendency to view "purity" and "holiness" as synonymous should not be transferred naively to the ancient world,

including the Bible (Wilson, “Holiness” and “Purity,” 1–4). Although Miller has demonstrated that the concepts of holiness and purity are closely related, he argues that the two should not be equated (Miller, *Religion of Ancient Israel*, 131–32, 149–55).

Holiness as Transcendence, the “Wholly Other”

Anthropologists and other socio-historical scientists have examined holiness within the broader milieu of primitive religion and defined it as “transcendence.” Otto calls the non-rational factor within divinity “holiness” in his work *The Idea of Holy*. Based on a largely introspective method, Otto argues that “the holy”—or the transcending “Wholly Other”—is central to all religious feeling and experience, which he refers to as *mysterium tremendum*. Based on the various emotional experiences humanity has had with the divine, Otto believes the human experience produces a mysterious awe in the presence of the power of “the holy” or the “numinous.” In his view, “the holy” becomes that which “commands our respect” (Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 51). Otto rejects the idea that holiness is separation, instead suggesting that holiness is an objective force outside of the self (Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 11). The feelings that result from this experience with the “Wholly Other” are that of being reduced to “nothing” in the presence of a higher power, which Otto calls “creature-consciousness” (Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 9–10, 88–89).

Using an anthropological approach, Durkheim claims that holiness embodies the sense of “otherworldliness” and is central to all of religion (echoing Otto’s work). He argues that all religions are founded on a “bipartite division of the whole universe” in which there are sacred and profane spheres inherently hostile to each other (Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 40). However, in contrast to Otto, Durkheim’s concept of “otherworldliness” does not mean the supernatural itself, but power in general; in addition, he holds onto the belief that holiness is connected to separation.

Influenced by Durkheim’s arguments, Söderblom affirms that holiness is based on the belief in a transcendent, undefinable power (Söderblom, “Holiness,” 731–32). In his view, holiness is an ambiguous power that supersedes humanity and provokes a mental reaction of awe (Söderblom, “Holiness,” 732). Other scholars characterize humanity’s internal response to power or deity as one of awe and fear. The object that produces such response is “the holy.” They borrow from anthropological studies on purity and ritual to stress the grave danger of approaching “the holy.” For example:

- Hänel applies religious phenomenological theory to Israelite religion and proposes that all of Israelite religion revolves around the radical “otherness” of God’s holiness (Hänel, *Die Religion der Heiligkeit*).
- Müller contends that holiness refers primarily to a transcendent power and terrifying might wrapped up in absolute divinity, seen as “otherness” (Müller, “*qdš*,” 3:1107–08; also Levine, *Leviticus*, 256–57).
- Propp, coming from an anthropological perspective, argues that holiness predominantly functions as fear of the powerful. He suggests God’s holiness sets Him “above his Creation” (Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 683).

Sproul, Miller, and Blenkinsopp, among others, find it helpful to apply such social scientific theories to holiness in the Bible:

- Sproul draws on Otto's work to tie together the theories of separateness and transcendence and forges his own view on holiness in the Bible based on Otto's notion of the *mysterium tremendum*, or "awful mystery" (Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 56–58).
- Miller employs anthropological language of "power" and "numinous" in his study of holiness in the Old Testament (Miller, *Religion of Ancient Israel*, 132, 137).
- Blenkinsopp draws on Otto's category of the *mysterium tremendum* in his argument that "holy, holy, holy" in Isa 6:3 implies the "otherness" of God that is synonymous with His glory (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 225).

Most scholars agree that the Bible represents God's transcendence and superior power as distinct from the rest of the universe. However, scholars such as Wilson doubt whether the biblical terms for "holy" and "holiness" were meant to convey this particular theological notion. Wilson argues that Otto created his concepts of transcendence from introspection and social studies, not empirical data from textual usage (Wilson, "Holiness" and "Purity," 55–57). Gentry similarly criticizes the view of holiness as transcendence based on passages in the Bible where holiness describes the *opposite* idea: The holy God comes to meet with humanity, rather than God separating away out of His transcendence (Gentry, "No One Holy," 22). This is particularly apparent in consecration of priests (using the Hiphil of קָדַשׁ , *qdsh*, "to make holy"), which is intended to bring priests appropriately into the presence of Yahweh (e.g., Exod 28:3; see also Exod 3, 19; Josh 3:5). Jensen believes Otto's language of the "Wholly Other" fails to grasp the whole picture of holiness. In his view, transcendence and the response it evokes might play only a minor role in biblical holiness (Jensen, "Holiness in the Priestly Writings," 102–03).

Holiness as Competing Ideologies in Scripture

Source critics, who generally hold that the Bible is composed of various textual sources, often argue that the Bible contains competing ideologies of holiness. Three proposed sources in the Bible attested to communicate divergent views of holiness are:

1. the Priestly School
2. the Holiness School
3. Deuteronomy

According to Wright, the Priestly literature depicted holiness as "a responsibility ensuing from God choosing Israel" (Wright, "Holiness," 3:238). In his view, the texts belonging to the Priestly source depict God as "holy" in the present (see Lev 11:41, 45; 19:2; 20:26) and the Israelites' holiness as a potential future. Wright goes on to suggest that the Deuteronomistic source countered the Priestly literature by depicting the Israelites as existing in a state of holiness since God chose them (see Deut 7:6; 14:2, 21). Regev similarly suggests that the Priestly literature presented a "dynamic holiness," whereas the Deuteronomist presented a "static holiness" (Regev, "Priestly Dynamic Holiness," 243–61). Miller similarly detects varying holiness ideologies in the sources of the Bible, particularly the Priestly Writings and Deuteronomy. According to Miller, the Priestly writings depict holiness strictly in terms of the holy-profane categories of priest and sanctuary. Yet in Deuteronomy, the ideology of holiness was transferred to categories of Israel and nations (Miller, *Religion of Ancient Israel*, 155–61; on the

distinct ideologies of holiness in the Pentateuch sources, see Milgrom, "Changing Concept," 65–75).

Wright further distinguished between the Priestly source and a later source called the Holiness School (see Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence*), which repackaged holiness as seen first in the Priestly literature (Wright, "Holiness in Leviticus and Beyond," 351–64). He proposed that the Holiness School made holiness a requirement for Israel in texts like Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26, whereas it was not a requirement in the earlier Priestly literature. Milgrom similarly believes that the Holiness School altered the Priestly writings' conception of holiness, particularly by expanding holiness to all of Israel and introducing ethical dimensions (Milgrom, "Changing Concept," 67; see also Lohfink, "Opfer und Säkularisierung im Deuteronomium," 35–36).

The source-critical approach offers helpful insight into the different perspectives of holiness contained within the Bible, demonstrating that different biblical authors may have assigned different meanings to the terms "holy" and "holiness." However, the source critical arguments have been criticized as offering unproven assumptions based on the outdated Documentary Hypothesis and dating of texts (see e.g., Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch*; see also Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 46–59).

Holiness as God's Character

Hartley believes holiness is defined as all of God's character: "Holiness is not one attribute of Yahweh's among others; rather it is the quintessential nature of Yahweh as God" (Hartley, *Leviticus*, lvi). Leviticus 20:3 and 22:32 support this view by describing God's very name as holy. Hartley and others go on to suggest that holiness is defined by God's inner nature, manifested on the outside by His glory (e.g., Isa 6:3; see also Olyan, *Rites and Rank*; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*). In this view, holiness is not reduced to "separateness" or being "wholly other," but rather is a broad conception of everything that God is Himself. Along these lines, Levine observes that God's holiness appears interchangeable with His whole being, especially in the context of oaths (Levine, "The Language of Holiness," 252). Support for this view are Amos 4:2, "The Lord God has sworn by his holiness," and Amos 6:8, "The Lord God has sworn by his life" (see also Psa 89:36; Jer 51:14). Elsewhere, Milgrom has suggested that the holiness of God should be seen as a manifestation of all God's moral attributes, thus linking God's character and moral purity to the concept of holiness (Milgrom, "Rationale for Cultic Law," 106). Jensen counters that the definition of holiness as a summary for all of God's character may convey too broad a definition; in his view, this theory does not say anything specific about holiness itself (Jensen, "Holiness," 105).

Holiness as Belonging to the Divine Sphere

Costecalde and others have sought to use a philological-contextual method to determine the semantic meaning for the biblical terms "holy" and "holiness." They suggest that interpreters should systematically examine every instance of the biblical lexemes associated with "holiness" and develop a definition based on that data (Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*, 31). This approach has led to a growing consensus that "holy" fundamentally indicates membership or belonging to the divine sphere. For example, Jensen suggests a sense of belonging undergirds all the theories on holiness: "Holiness ... is anything that belongs to God's realm or

sphere of existence” (Jensen, “Holiness,” 105; see also Jensen, *Graded Holiness*). Costecalde reaches the same conclusion, proposing that holiness intimates membership in God’s sphere (Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique*; see also Costecalde, “Sacré”). Accordingly, he suggests the biblical terms often translated as “holy” or “holiness” could be appropriately rendered “consecration” since items and people are consecrated to God, belonging to Him. He suggests that this view aligns with the ancient Near Eastern usage of holiness language.

Wilson offers an argument similar to Costecalde’s but distinguishes between the noun “holiness” (שְׁדִיחַ, *qodesh*) and the adjective “holy” (שְׁדִיחַ, *qadosh*). In Wilson’s view, the noun indicates “holiness of belonging to the divine,” while the adjective indicates “the holiness of proximity to the divine.” Based on these definitions, Wilson suggests that the adjective may communicate gradations of holiness (Wilson, “Holiness” and “Purity”, 87–91; he does not, however, note any nuances with the verb שְׁדִיחַ, *qadash*, “to be holy”).

Hess notes that the Bible visualizes three concentric circles of holiness revolving around the presence of God (Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 183; see also Miller, *Religion of Ancient Israel*, 144–48, who advocates gradations of holiness in ancient Israel):

1. In the circle closest to God’s presence are the priests, ones who are dedicated most to being in Yahweh’s presence.
2. The immediate outer circle includes the Israelites, who are more generally devoted to God.
3. The final outer circle encompasses the nations of the world, those who have no dedication to God’s presence and thus are not holy.

Gentry builds on Costecalde’s philological work and applies it to Exod 3, 19, and Isa 6. Based on these texts, he suggests the act of consecration (“to be made holy” in many English Bibles) prepares someone or something to meet with the presence of God. In his view, a “consecrated people,” are a “people who belong to God” (Gentry, “No One Holy,” 25). Gentry proposes that God’s own holiness means He is devoted to His people; alternatively, God’s people are holy if they are devoted to God. Covenantal relationship forms the context of this devotion, since those who are in covenant with God are assumed to be devoted to God—that is, they are “holy” (and vice versa). In Gentry’s view, we should not equate holiness with moral purity or transcendence; rather, holiness (i.e., devotion) in the context of covenant *produces* moral purity and separation from sin. Like Costecalde, Gentry’s approach differs from anthropological approaches in that his work begins with the biblical text itself, using a philological method to allow the context to define holiness without reference to the social sciences.

The rise of the philological-contextual approach to holiness over the past 25 years has yet to receive much sustained interaction or criticism from anthropologists or more traditional biblical scholars. It remains to be seen whether this conception of holiness will be accepted outside of the philological study of the Bible. One could anticipate that the view of holiness as indicating “belongingness” (Jensen, *Graded Holiness*, 40–41) or “devotion” (Gentry, “No One Holy,” 17–38) might be criticized as being too narrow, not taking into account theology and experience. Likewise, there is always the danger of reducing the concept of holiness to a lexeme (Jensen, *Graded Holiness*, 40–41). The conclusions of the philological approach come into direct contradiction with many theological traditions that maintain a paradigm of holiness equating

holiness with moral purity or transcendence. These differences would have to be worked out and might subsequently reshape theological discourse.¹

¹ Lyons, M. C. (2016). [Holiness](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.