

What did sanctification mean in the Old Testament? **A Series on What is Sanctification: Part 1**

The Hebrew term that forms the basis for the English translation “sanctify” is “qâdash.” and it means “to consecrate,” “be holy,” “be separate” or “be hallowed.”

In consideration of its various stem forms (i.e. qal, niph'al, etc.), the term can be generally understood as “set apart to or for God” which imparts a quality of being holy or of being sacred. The noun, sanctification, essentially means the state of being clean or holy.

In the case of the term “sanctify,” it may be worthwhile to take a look at its antonym “defile” to gain another perspective into its meaning. In the Old Testament, “defile” was used to describe something unclean or polluted, or an action that could demean and pollute oneself and/or others. It was applied without distinction to either ethics or religious practice; both moral and spiritual transgressions were understood to be violations of God’s will. Disregarding God’s law was seen as a source of defilement.

Similar in meaning to “defile” is the term “profane” which God uses frequently to contrast with what was holy; God wanted to prohibit people from treating something He deemed holy with irreverence (i.e. Lev 22:2, 15).

But defining words alone may not be sufficient to understand the meaning of “sanctify” as God would want us to know the term. How is the term “qâdash” used in the Old Testament?

Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness (**qâdash**),.. (Ex 15:11)

As Moses and the Israelites sing to God, they recognize that God’s moral perfection or freedom from moral evil sets Him apart from other gods and is majestic in its uniqueness (1 Sam 2:2; Rev 15:4).

Isaiah observes that this aspect of God is emphasized even among angelic creatures like seraphim, “And one called out to another and said, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.’” (Isa 6:3)

“Qâdash” places a focus on God and the realm that He exists in. As God is holy (Ps 99:9), His name is Holy (Ps 99:3; 111:9) and all that comes to His realm must be holy. It is here, where all that belongs to God’s realm, that the “qâdash” word group is used most frequently; it is all of those things that God separates and devotes to Himself that become holy: time, space, objects and people.

When directly present on earth, God sanctified the area of contact with His glory (Ex 3:5; 19:23; 40:32-38).

I will meet there with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me. I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. They shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God. (Ex 29:43-46)

Certain times are sanctified and set apart for the Lord such as the Sabbath (Gen 2:3; Ex 20:8-12; 31:13), various festivals (Lev 23:4-44) and the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:12).

The Tabernacle and all of its objects (Ex 28:4-43; 29:36-44; 40:9-10; Lev 8:1-36) were sanctified, and later, the Temple (1 Kings 8:64-9:9; 2 Chron 7:1-22) and the land of Canaan (Ex 15:13) and city of Jerusalem (Rev 11:1-3) as well.

The levitical system of priests who serve in the Tabernacle were set apart for the service of God (Ex 19:14-23; 28:41; 29:1; 30:30-32; 40:12-15) and their food as well (Ex 29:31-34; Lev 2:9-16; 7:33-35; 18:8).

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The objects that serve in worship are sanctified such as first born males of animals and human beings (Ex 13:2, 11-13; Lev 27:26; Num 3:13;8:17) and the sacrifices of crops and animals (Ex 29:10-30; Lev 27:30-33; Deut 26:13).

In sanctifying with His presence and demanding what and how to sanctify before His presence, God provides an initial concept of what it means to be holy, and it is codified with the Law of Moses.

With its 613 commands, the Mosaic Law comprised of three components: a) moral law (i.e. commands and ten commandments, etc.), b) ceremonial law (i.e. Tabernacle practices, feasts, priesthood, sacrifices, etc.) and c) civil law (i.e. sanitation, quarantine, diets, lawsuits, crime, etc.).

The purpose of the Mosaic Law was to teach the nation of Israel what sin was so that they would learn the concept of holiness. As a conditional covenant, the Mosaic Law provided a basis for ethical behavior, and the concept of holiness took on an ethical nature.

Yet the nation of Israel would not have learned of the Law of Moses had they not agreed to be obedient to God. It was only after their unanimous agreement did God sanctify the nation of Israel as His people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also **believe** in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the Lord. (Ex 19:5-9)

So there was a prerequisite of faith, a belief in the existence of God and placing a trust in the word of God communicated through Moses, before Israel was set apart and sanctified as God's people (Ex 19:10-14; Lev 11:44-45; 20:7-8; Deut 5:1, 32-33; Ps 4:3; 1 Pet 1:15-16)!!

The nation of Israel would discover that keeping the Law was impossible. Simply breaking one command violated the whole Law and made a person guilty (Gal 5:3; James 2:10). While the means of covering one's sins was adequate for forgiveness, human beings could never meet God's standard of holiness, which the Israelite would be constantly reminded of with their repeated sacrifices.

The concept of faith and what it meant to be sanctified by the Lord would be difficult for the nation of Israel to grasp. This can be seen in how the nation perceived God. From the spectacular phenomena pillar of cloud / pillar of fire (Deut 1:32-33) or thick cloud and consuming fire (Ex 19:9; 24:15-18; 40:34-38), the man made Ark of the Covenant became the symbol of God's presence (Num 10:33-36) to lead the nation in their wandering and battle.

The Ark of the Covenant was perceived as something of mysterious power. If one approached (Lev 16:2, 13) or touched (Num 4:15; 2 Sam 6:7; 1 Chron 13:9-10) it inappropriately, it meant death. Looking into the Ark meant death (1 Sam 6:20). When priests, carrying the Ark, stepped on the flooded Jordan River, its waters parted and allowed their crossing (Josh 3:11-17). Unorthodox in tactic but essential, Israel used the Ark in their conquest of Jericho (Josh 6:6-16).

The concept of the holy was erroneously understood in the context of terrifying awesome power. In fact, it is when the Divine comes in contact with sin or the unconsecrated that awesome power is terrifying!

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It is in this context that Moses speaks of God's covenant that teaches the nation how to sanctify itself as God's separate and holy people.

Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, 'Assemble the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words so they may learn to **fear Me** all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.' You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom. (Deut 4:9-11)

It is also in this context that Solomon speaks of in Proverbs.

The **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov 1:7)

It is instructive to note that of all of the adults who were eyewitnesses of the God's glory and signs in Egypt and the wilderness, only two would enter the Promised Land: Joshua (Ex 24:13) and Caleb (Num 14:22-24).

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