

# The Translation of "Holy"

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One of the first problems which face the translator of the Scriptures into any language to which its ideas are essentially strange is that of the word "holy", with its allied word "sanctify" and their derivatives. Much has been said about the necessity of avoiding any word which might have the simple meaning of "tabu". Stress has been laid upon the advisability of finding a word with a distinct ethical significance to render the idea of "holiness". The writer feels, however, that this may be overstressed, and that such an emphasis is partly due to a general misconception as to the primary significance of the word in question.

In the Bantu languages Luvale and Lunda (Ndembu) we have for years used a word which means strictly "tabu". One of the neighboring languages, however, in its translation has avoided that word, because, claims the translator, the idea of "tabu" is not the significance of "holy". In conversation with this man some years ago, I asked him what word he had used instead. When he told me, I inquired as to the meaning of the word, and he informed me it meant something like "purity". Now I submit that that is not the primary significance of the word "holiness", though I grant that in much Christian thinking "holiness" and "purity" are viewed as almost synonymous terms. The work of the translator of the Scriptures is, however, not to render popular Christian thinking, but rather to find the basic ideas of the Scriptures themselves, and translate them. And to use a word meaning "purity" for the Scripture "holiness" is largely to miss the deep significance of the idea.

In the consideration of our subject, let us note: (1) that the Scriptural thought of "holiness" is not *primarily* a moral one, and (2) that the words chosen by the Holy Spirit to set forth the doctrine in the Scriptures are not *primarily* ethical in their import.

1. The Scriptural thought of "holiness" is not *primarily* (please note emphasis) a moral one. Granted that in the case of God, who is the great Moral Light of Creation, every term used of Him inevitably becomes colored with beams from His Being. But the primary thought of holiness, as applied to God Himself, has to do more with His infinite removal from all Creation. It is basically the idea expressed in the theological concept of transcendence, with its accompanying implication of awfulness and unapproachability. One writer holds it to be the sense of "separation from all that is human and earthly". But it is more than that. For it bears the sense of his separateness from the angelic host as well, so that even the seraphim of Isaiah 6 approach Him only with their feet and faces covered. Holiness implies the thought of His dread infinity in every sense of the word. He is the one from whose face even the heavens and the earth flee away and no place is found for them. He is the one whom no man has seen or can see, who dwells in the light unapproachable. It is evident to anyone who follows the doctrine of holiness through the Word of God that any term indicating merely moral excellence or purity will fall far short of expressing the idea.

In the case of things which are dedicated, there is also no primary indication of ethical qualities. Sinai was "to have bounds set about it", i.e. "to be sanctified" (Exodus 19 : 23). That is to say, it is to be set apart; not from sin primarily, but from all common approach. The high priest is "Holiness to the Lord". True, he is to obey the commands of God, but the primary idea is that he is separated from all common pursuits, and dedicated to His special service. The altar is to be sanctified (Exodus 29 : 36). Whosoever touches it will be holy (Exodus 29 : 37). The priest's garments are holy (Exodus 28 : 2). Jerusalem is the holy city, and so on through constant references with the primary significance of separation from common uses and relationships and of dedication to Divine ones.

Holiness in the Scripture naturally gains an ethical significance through the character of the Holy One. That is to say, since the Transcendent Infinity is a spotless Infinity, He is separate from all defilement. And even those who are sanctified (set apart for Him) must not, indeed cannot, approach Him in a defiled state. He who is essentially aloof from creation is necessarily so from creation's sin. So he who would be sanctified to God must accordingly be set apart from all which He abhors. This, however, vitally important as it is, is rather a subordinate notion, growing out of the primary significance of the doctrine of Divine holiness.

2. The words chosen by the Holy Spirit to set forth the doctrine in the Scriptures are not *primarily* ethical in their import. "In primitive Semitic usage 'holiness' seems to have expressed nothing more than that ceremonial separation of an object from common use which the modern study of savage religions has rendered familiar under the name of 'tabu'" (Int. Stand. Bib. Encyclopaedia, quoted from W. R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites*). The basically non-ethical force of the original term may be seen in its derivatives, for *kadhash* "to be (come) holy" is used also as "sanctify". But *kadesh* is a "sodomite" and *kedheshah* is a "harlot". The reason is that these unfortunate individuals were "sacred" men and women, sanctified to the service of the false gods of heathenism, in that those gods were "worshipped" in licentious rites.

These considerations are not here set down as in any manner lowering the Christian concept of holiness, but they are facts which are of significance to the translator. It is evident that with this family of words, as with many others, enlarged meanings and associations have been given to terms through their appropriation by God in His revelation of Himself. Out of the mere thought of an amoral sanctity, i.e. of simple dedication to a deity or deities, has been developed, through Divine glorification of the words, all that we understand, both as regards God's awful majesty and His absolute separateness, as portrayed to our minds by the word "holiness".

To return to our choice of words out here in Africa; the stem *-jila* means primarily "tabu", to be certain. A man is *wajila*, not in the sense that he is any better morally than others, but only in that he cannot do or eat certain things, which, however, have no ethical significance in themselves. A woman's pots are *jajila*, i.e. only she may use them.

A thing may be *cijila*, i.e. it is forbidden or "tabu". A spot may be *kwajila*; only a certain man or men may go there under certain conditions. It is possible to use the verb stem *-jilika* "set apart a person or place". It is also possible to employ a reversive verb stem *-jilulula* "untabu" or "make common again". It is true that these meanings leave much to be desired for the rendering of "holy", "sanctify", etc. But *kadhash* left much to be desired when the Holy Spirit chose it to reveal God's holiness in the Old Testament. However, the writer knows of no other word in these languages more approximating to, or holding any possibility whatsoever of being infused with, the true Divine ideas. During the period of more than fifty years in which the gospel has been preached in these parts, it has been found that teaching and preaching have served to draw the contrast between God's *kujila* and man's. It can be shown how God's *kujila* involves His uniqueness, majesty and unapproachability, and how it involves also His entire separation from everything defiling. It can be shown how the believer's *kujila* is not, like that of others, a separation from certain articles of food, or any merely amoral sanctification, but involves dedication to God, and simultaneous separation from all which displeases Him. As in the case of the terms used in the original Scripture, the larger and ethical significances have come to be connected with the word for believers, and the word itself has been glorified.

It is not claimed, of course, that our experience here can be a rule for all other languages, but it does seem to us that it is a mistaken procedure always to reject such native words merely because they do not carry the whole dignity of our concepts, which have been formed in the full light of God's revelation. Had God thus limited Himself by the rejection of imperfect human words, He could never have fully revealed Himself to us in His Word.

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## Some Notes on the Version of St. Mark in the Spoken Language of Palestine

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When considering the translating of the Gospels into the spoken Arabic of Palestine, there were four guiding principles apart from the natural desire not to give the impression that such a version could ever take the place in the public reading of the Scriptures of the great classical translation in use throughout almost all the non-Roman churches of the Near East.

First, it was hoped that the Gospel in the language of the people would be eventually as welcome as were the same books when given to the Christian public originally either in the Aramaic or the Greek of ordinary people.

Secondly, it was desired to produce a translation that would be as close to the Greek as possible, embodying at least some of the results