

A Holy God Among a Holy People in a Holy Place: The Enduring Eschatological Hope of the Scriptures*

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Eschatology Reconsidered

In his Anchor Bible Dictionary article on the subject David L. Petersen defines eschatology as follows: “Derived from the Gk word *eschatos*, meaning ‘last’ or ‘final’, eschatology is teaching about ‘the last things.’ It refers to a time in the future when the course of history will be changed to such an extent that one can speak of an entirely new state of reality.”¹

However, as Donald Gowan points out in his *Eschatology of the Old Testament*, “Although the word literally means ‘doctrine of the end’, the OT does not speak of the end of the world, of time or of history. It promises the end of sin (Jer 33:8), of war (Mic 4:3), of human infirmity (Isa 35:5-6a), of hunger (Ezek 36:30), of killing or harming any living thing (Isa 11:9a).” Gowan then sums up all of the above by suggesting that justification for calling the OT hope ‘eschatology’ is that it is all about ‘the end of evil’.²

May I suggest that Biblical scholarship might do even better justice to the material in Scripture by defining eschatology as ‘*the doctrine of ultimate things*’. Ultimate reality is not just what will transpire at the end of time, but that which has always existed in the heavenlies and which God apparently has always sought to make a present reality, according to the Law and the Prophets. This paper is built around an understanding of

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¹ David L. Petersen, ‘Eschatology’ *Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol 2* (1992) 575. Petersen adds that the term is used with widely differing meanings: in Greek it meant ‘farthest extent in space, final element of time, and last piece of money’, and was ‘most often innately communal and cosmic in its reference’ (576).

² D.Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 2.

eschatology as the study of ultimate things, ultimate realities.³ One such is that of a holy God among a holy people in a holy place as the enduring eschatological hope of the scriptures.⁴

A Holy God Among A Holy People In A Holy Place

The Old Testament Picture

The sweep of the Biblical narrative begins with God enjoying fellowship with the sinless man he has created in an unsullied environment and ends with the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb living among a holy people in a holy city, from which everyone unclean is excluded. At many points in between God intentionally tries to recreate this picture.

The first time in history that God explicitly reveals himself as holy⁵ is in a bush near Mt Horeb to a Midianite-Egyptian-Hebrew shepherd named Moses. Some few dramatic events later he reveals his holiness more fully at the same mountain to Moses' people. Before cutting a covenant with them, God intimates that they are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to him (Ex 19:6). In ten well-chosen words⁶ God gives the adjective 'holy' some moral content and in the months and years that follow he articulates through a plethora of case-law⁷ precisely how he

³ My suggestion is not a million miles away from Samuel Terrien's outlook. He writes: "Prophets are usually mistaken for predictors. The prophets of Israel unveiled *not the future but the absolute*" (emphasis mine), *The Elusive Presence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 227.

⁴ See Caird & Hurst, who point out that, while the OED definition deals with the ultimate destiny of the individual, the word has come to be understood mainly in a historical sense as covering "the biblical teaching about the destiny of the world and *the working out of God's purposes in and through his holy people*" (emphasis mine), *New Testament Theology*, 243.

⁵ Concerning the holiness of God, J.E.Hartley writes, "Holiness is not one attribute of Yahweh's among others; rather it is the quintessential nature of Yahweh as God", *Word Biblical Commentary: Leviticus* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1992) lvii. The older OT theologian Edmund Jacob wrote in similar vein, "Holiness is not one divine quality among others, even the chiefest, for it expresses what is characteristic of God and corresponds precisely to his deity." *Old Testament Theology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 86.

⁶ i.e. the Decalogue.

⁷ A learned friend and OT specialist who read this pointed out that he and others are actively querying whether case-law is the most accurate description of the legislation that follows the Decalogue. In response to this helpful comment I made a conscious decision

expects his chosen people to live. The great danger is that if a holy God comes to live among an unholy people, his holiness will consume them. The fireworks at Sinai, plus various miracles and judgements in the desert, leave the Israelites in little doubt about the awesomeness of God's holiness. The ashes of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-3),⁸ not to mention those of 250 men who offer incense presumptuously (Num 16:35), bear silent but eloquent testimony to the fact that a holy God is a consuming fire (Deut 4:24). It is this very likelihood which motivates God's refusal to accompany the Israelites on their journey from Sinai to Canaan.⁹ A threefold solution is therefore proposed.

Firstly, God says, "Have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them" (Ex 25:8). Before the construction of the tabernacle, God goes before or behind the Israelites on the march, but when they stop, it would appear from Exodus 33 that God stays at a safe distance. Thus Moses has to get clear away from the camp in order to enjoy his regular conversations with God in the tent of meeting (Ex 33:7). This does not satisfy God apparently, who wishes to be central in every respect in the lives of his people. He wants to be among them, not on the periphery of their communal life. The construction of a clean and consecrated place right in the middle of the camp is God's brainchild. The elaborate restrictions on access to the inner and outer sancta and to the surrounding courtyard establish a *cordon sanitaire* between the holy and dangerous God and the people he chooses to dwell among. Exodus 40: 34-35

to refrain from an exegetical paperchase on two grounds. Firstly, my argument remains unaffected by whatever label one puts on the other laws. Secondly, Biblical Theology as an academic enterprise will be smothered at birth, if every statement made about any part of the whole Bible has to be beyond scholarly dispute. In my judgement, Biblical Theology has to rely most of the time on the building-blocks provided by a fairly well-established exegetical consensus in order to explore the relation of the parts to the whole Biblical picture. Otherwise, if unassailable exegetical expertise in every part of the Bible is a prerequisite, hardly anyone will dare to attempt the task at all. Besides, any material produced by a rare latter-day Renaissance man is likely to be virtually unreadable because buried under an avalanche of footnotes. All of which will be a great shame, because the Church is crying out to know what the Bible as a whole has to say on any number of subjects.

⁸ Note God's response: "I will show myself holy among those who are near me ..."

⁹ Ex 33:3 "I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

describes the glorious initial consummation of a holy God's desire to dwell among his people:¹⁰

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

Secondly, God commands all the people of Israel to be holy, because he himself is holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:1-2). The Book of Leviticus elaborates what David Clines has called the theme of the Pentateuch by spelling out in detail the means by which the relationship now established is to be maintained.¹¹ The people of Israel, who have been constituted holy by virtue of a covenant-relationship with a holy God, are now commanded to become like him.¹² The Holiness Code spells out in detail that this involves a change in spiritual conduct (no compromise with occultic Canaanite religious practices), in sexual conduct (the expression of sexuality is given clear limits) and in social conduct (the way relatives and neighbours are to be treated is itemised and then summarised in Lev 19:18). The motivation for such a holy lifestyle is not meant to be the accumulation of merit or the attempt to earn salvation. These people are already redeemed. They are already in covenant-relationship with God.

¹⁰ The people do not create a holy place for a holy God to occupy. Rather, as J.G. Gammie says, "God is the one who sanctifies tent, altar, and priests. Indeed, the former is set apart, made holy not so much by human action but by the presence of the glory of God." *Holiness in Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 17.

¹¹ D.J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 50.

¹² I am struck by how easily the Biblical command to the people of God to be holy is ignored or brushed aside by some fellow-Christians, and this despite a steady stream of books which have reiterated the charge over many centuries. If we think a little more about it, we note that this is a command from Almighty God, not just some pious wish. In the worldview of the ancient Israelite there was no accepted doctrine of the afterlife, and therefore the only possible fulfilment of this command was in the here and now. As Caird & Hurst point out, "...most of the books of the Old Testament were written at a time when the Hebrew people had no belief in an afterlife for the individual. For them life meant this life...Their eschatology was concerned with the vindication in history of the truth and justice of God and of His purpose for Israel and the world." *New Testament Theology*, 268. With regard to a full Biblical Theology, this command is not superseded by NT revelation but reiterated explicitly by the apostle Peter (1 Pet 1:14-16). With regard to hermeneutics, when we bring this command to the touchstone of Christ, we hear him saying, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt 5:48) Whatever else that means, I think I am fairly confident that it does not imply any watering down of the demands that God makes on his people.

So a holy God wishes to dwell among a holy people without harming them. But, thirdly, he also wants to dwell in a holy place. It is not sufficient for the tabernacle to be holy; the camp must also be holy. All sources of defilement must be removed. Lepers are to be excluded, for example, because “they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them” (Num 5:3). Excretion must take place outside the camp, because in the words of Deut 23:12-14, the camp must be holy, so that God might not see anything indecent among them and turn away from them.

What is the rationale behind all this fussiness? Why exactly does a holy God want to dwell among a holy people in a holy place? Well, the answer does not lie on the surface of the Biblical text. Perhaps it can be teased out, however, as an implication of certain texts. An explanation might be made in terms of *mirroring* and of *mission*.

Judaism is a religion which prohibits the making of images of its God. Some people think on the basis of Gen 1:26-27 that this is because the individual human being is the sole legitimate image of God.¹³ NT Christology supports this individualistic interpretation by portraying Jesus as the icon or image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Trinitarian thinking, however, provides a corporate understanding of the *imago dei*. In the Eastern Orthodox emphasis on the *perichoresis* or mutual indwelling of the Holy Trinity, God is not a monad but a tri-personal being-in-communion. Therefore what mirrors him best is or are people-in-communion. How is a world estranged from its maker to know what God is like? Simple. Firstly, by looking at the Israelites,¹⁴ and secondly, at the Church.

This mirroring of God then is a crucial aspect of the mission of the people of God. If the telling phrase from Exodus about Israel being chosen as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is reconsidered for a moment, what can be learnt? A priest exercises a mediatorial role between God and the people, so who are a kingdom of priests to mediate between? Presumably

¹³ C.J.H. Wright: “...the only image that was ‘allowed’ was the one God had designed and created himself - the image of God, man himself.” *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983), 31.

¹⁴ On this point I concur with Chris Wright, who writes that in giving laws “God’s purpose...was not just righteous individuals, but a new community who in their social life would embody those qualities of righteousness, peace, justice and love which reflect God’s own character and were his original purpose for mankind.” *Living as the People of God*, 35.

between God and the nations,¹⁵ thus fulfilling the promise to Abraham that through his seed all the nations would be blessed.¹⁶ Corporately, collectively, communally, in their shared living, Israel is called to model the life of the Godhead, to live out the love and goodness and justice of God for the nations to see and be drawn to. But they can only be a kingdom of priests insofar as they are also a holy nation.¹⁷ If they are indistinguishable from their neighbours in their spiritual, sexual and social conduct, the mission of God is dead in the water.

The repeated ministry of the prophets during the monarchy is to call Israel back to the standards of Torah,¹⁸ back to their true vocation of being a holy nation in a holy place, among whom a holy God lives. If she falls short of her calling, God's saving purposes for the nations are frustrated. Only by maintaining God's standards in her public life can Israel mediate a true knowledge of YHWH to others. The only way this can happen is by a devout obedience to Torah and a resolute avoidance of being contaminated by pagan religion and pagan moral values. The words and actions of the prophets are aimed therefore at exposing the various ways in which Israel's holiness has been compromised. These include:

1. *idolatry* - which the prophets often portray as adultery (Hos 4:12, 9:1; Jer 5:11, 13:27), as infidelity to a marriage which has taken place at Sinai between YHWH and his bride Israel. What is the contradiction here? God is faithful but his icon, Israel, is unfaithful.
2. *iniquity* - which distorts the moral picture of God's character which Israel is meant to portray (Hos 4:1-3; Mic 6:10-12; Jer 9:4-6). The contradiction? God is good but his icon, Israel, is wicked.
3. *injustice* - which perverts the moral order of a society that is meant to demonstrate a restored creation-order in its relationships between people (Am 5:11-12; Mic 3:1-3; Jer 5:28). The contradiction here? God is just but his icon, Israel, is unjust.

¹⁵ See S. Terrien: "... Israel in its entirety becomes 'a holy nation,' because Israel's vocation is to become the priest of the King of history. Israel, the covenant people, is to mediate the presence of Yahweh to the world." *The Elusive Presence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 125.

¹⁶ An idea whose OT climax is found in Isa 66:18-21.

¹⁷ See Chris Wright: "Their very existence and character as a society were to be a witness to God, a model or paradigm of his holiness expressed in the social life of a redeemed community." *Living as the People of God*, 43.

¹⁸ E.g. Mal 4:4 "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel."

Thorough-going exposure of children to the teachings of Torah is the medicine against pagan corruption recommended by both the Torah (Deut 6:4-9) and the Wisdom-tradition (Ps 119; Prov 22:6). Divine discipline is a remedial method used by God to sanctify both individuals (Prov 3:11-12) and nation (Deut 8:2-5). When sound Biblical teaching fails, God's righteous judgement, announced so frequently by the prophets, is designed to restore Israel to her former state. An escalating series of sanctions is built into the covenant to achieve the necessary turnaround. If famine, drought, plague and sword fail, the last resort is exile from the land. The very act of expelling the rebellious nation from the land has sanctification as its objective. Exile cleanses the land of that which, and of those who, defile it. Exile purifies a people by leaving a remnant, who will be fit to reoccupy the land.

Cleansing and restoration are therefore integral to the eschatological hope of the prophets, and they are not for the far-off distant future, but for some time closer at hand. The ultimate hope is not linked to any particular time. It is not millenia or even centuries away. More often than not, the prophets refer to 'that day', the ever-recurring day of the LORD, when the suzerain breaks into history to call his wayward vassals to account. God's kingdom is right overhead at all times; God can break into history at any time and re-establish it. The prayer of Isa 64:1 is for YHWH to tear open the heavens and come down.

However, acts of national repentance are few and far between and often very short-lived. After the catastrophic fall of Jerusalem, the exilic prophets find the key to the fulfilment of the eschatological hope to be a new covenant predicted in Jer 31:31-34. When this happens, YHWH will put his law inside people and write it on their hearts. Instead of hating God's commandments as a painful duty, people will want to keep them. The desire to do so will come not from outside but from inside. The same kind of idea is expressed by Ezekiel (36:22-36) who foresees Israel's regathering from among the nations as bringing several spiritual changes in its wake: the cleansing of Israel from all her uncleannesses and from all her idols; the reception by Israel of a new tender heart (of flesh rather than stone); the reception by Israel of God's spirit within her; righteous living by Israel (God would cause them to walk in his statutes); right relationship with God ('you shall be my people and I will be your God').

It is hard to imagine a more complete description of sanctification, comprised of cleansing, filling and communion. The interesting aspect for our purposes is to note that Ezekiel does not appear to envisage all this in the far-off distant future, but as following Israel's return from exile in Babylon. Entire sanctification, the making of a holy people in a holy land fit for a holy God to live among, is portrayed by the prophets as the action of God, if not in the here and now, at least in the near future.

The fulfilment of the eschatological hope can be expressed then in precisely this way: it is of a holy God dwelling in the midst of a holy people in a holy land (Joel 2:27, 3:17, Is 12:6, 60:19-21) In Ezek 37:27-28 YHWH declares:

My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.

Those who have been re-gathered from exile, reanimated and sanctified by the breath/spirit of God, are to be reconstituted as the dwelling-place of a holy God in their own land in order that the nations will get the message about what God is like. The outcome of the sanctification of Israel will be the accomplishment of God's missionary purpose for Israel. God's glory will be revealed throughout the whole world (Is 11:9, 40:5). All nations will acknowledge his authority, and will participate in the worship of him (Mic 4:1-4, Is 66:18-21). In other words, the corporate sanctification of Israel is expected to lead to the corporate sanctification of the nations, and therefore to a universal state of righteousness, justice and peace. Sadly, Israel fails to live up to her privileges and responsibilities as the servant of YHWH and as the NT reveals, the eschatological hope of holiness comes to depend on Messiah for its fulfilment.

A Holy God Among A Holy People In A Holy Place

The New Testament Picture

The witness of the gospels to God's yearning for a people who will live holy lives is reiterated in a variety of ways. In Matthew Jesus is able to demand a greater righteousness than that of scribe and Pharisee (Mt 5:20) because he has come to fulfil the law and the prophets (Mt 5:17). The eschatological hopes of a new heart and new spirit under a new covenant expressed by Jeremiah and Ezekiel are fulfilled as Jesus takes the eucharistic cup and announces it as his blood of the new covenant (Mt 26:28).¹⁹ Mark depicts the life of the holy people of God as a gathering about the holy one of God, a following of him on his way to the cross, a self-denying, cross-bearing servant-lifestyle demanded right now. In the *Benedictus* Luke records Zechariah's prophetic expectation "that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (Lk 1:74-75).

In the Fourth Gospel the dwelling-place of God among his people is neither tabernacle nor temple but the body of the incarnate Logos, presented in Jn 1:14 as the one who tabernacled among them and

¹⁹ Most scholars appear to agree these days that Biblical eschatology is best expressed as the end having broken into the middle of time or of a tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. However, the consensus that the purposes of God will all ultimately be accomplished is broken by disagreement between Christian traditions as to what is included in the 'already' and what remains in the 'not yet' of sanctification. In my opinion, the eschatological shortcoming of a thoroughgoing Augustinian pessimism regarding the possibility of God's people living holy lives in the present is that it represents an *under-realised eschatology*. It speaks as though Jesus did not inaugurate the new covenant by his death on the cross. The problem with sinless perfectionism, on the other hand, is that it conveys an *over-realised eschatology*. People's relationship with God may be an experience of the life of the ages here and now, but we do not yet see all things under Jesus' feet. Rather, as the Church has always affirmed, the battle with the world, the flesh and the devil is ongoing and unremitting until the Parousia, the General Resurrection and the Great White Throne Judgement. According to Ezekiel, it is the Spirit of God which cleanses the heart from all its uncleanness, rather than the article of death or the fires of purgatory. In the light of Hebrews, one might amplify that idea by suggesting that the Spirit applies the benefits of the once-for-all atoning death of Christ. This combination matches the combination of the Christology of Rom 6 and the pneumatology of Rom 8 as the exegetical basis for a Christian life which overcomes sin. However, even in Romans 8, the creation still groans under its bondage to decay, and principalities and powers still strive, albeit unsuccessfully, to separate us from the love of Christ.

displayed God's glory. Then in Jn 2:19-21 the destroyed and resurrected body of Jesus is cryptically proffered as the replacement of Herod's temple, a point reinforced in the conversation with the woman at the well in 4:23.

If Jesus combines in his own person the presence of a holy God and the holy dwelling-place, what of the holy people? The moral and ethical demands are as high as ever in the Fourth Gospel. Those who love Jesus must keep his commandments, and again this is a means of demonstrating love and of remaining in intimate communion with Jesus. The metaphor of branches abiding in a vine (Jn 15) is then intensified in chapter 17 into a picture of the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and believers. There can be no stronger statement regarding a holy God's desire to live among a holy people than the perichoretic language of Jesus' high priestly prayer (Jn 17:20-23), amplifying his words in Jn 14:20 - "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

Out of people full of selfishness, faithlessness and failure Jesus welds the new covenant community. In Acts 2 Luke records how this motley crew, together now in one place, experience the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit upon all flesh, as prophesied by Joel. The Paraclete is no longer merely with them; he is in them (thus fulfilling Jesus' words in Jn 14:17) and he is between them,²⁰ as the basis of their fellowship with one another.

The doctrinal expositions in the Pauline epistles repeatedly extol the full sufficiency of Christ's death and resurrection to deal with sin in all its aspects, by contrast with the impotence of the law. The attendant ethical exhortations stress in a variety of ways that Christians are called to live up to their privileged position as members of the body of Christ, as stones in a holy temple, which is a dwelling place for God (Eph 2:22). A telling phrase at the beginning and end of Romans sums up the advantage of the gospel of Christ over the Torah. The purpose of the gospel concerning the whole Christ-event as delivered to the apostles is "to bring about the obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 16:26). That means to bring about faithful obedience to God, to make such a thing a present reality.

²⁰ Cf. Augustine's term '*vinculum caritatis*', whereby he portrayed the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son.

Innumerable scholars down through the centuries have interpreted Romans 7:14-25 as Paul's current and normative experience of the struggles and repeated defeats of the Christian life,²¹ but there are several problems with this line of interpretation.²² The brackets from the Prologue and Epilogue have already been mentioned. To that could be added the total absence of any Christological or pneumatological references in these verses. If the normal Christian life is of necessity one of spiritual impotence, frustration and defeat, then one wonders how the new covenant can be one whit better than the old covenant. The Jews knew what God required but could not or would not do it. Are Christians, according to Paul, in exactly the same boat?²³ Jeremiah and Ezekiel were apparently expecting God to write his Torah on people's hearts by his Spirit, thus making obedient and holy living both desirable and possible for the new covenant community.

The writer to the Hebrews has no such reservations about the superiority of the new covenant, about the utter sinlessness (Heb 4:15) of the fully

²¹ C.E.B. Cranfield, for example, is emphatic that "it presents the experience of Christians generally, including the very best and most mature." *Romans Vol I: International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 344. More recently J.I. Packer concurs in *A Passion for Holiness* (Nottingham: Crossway Books, 1992), 150-151. Nevertheless, the Reformed tradition in which both these eminent scholars stand is far from encouraging Christians, in Cranfield's phrase, "to wallow complacently in our sins" (Cranfield, 358). Likewise, the spirit of Packer's book totally justifies its title.

²² On such a massively contested interpretative *crux* the would-be Biblical theologian is in a no-win situation. The choice is between completely side-stepping knotty exegetical problems (and appearing a coward), offering a sketchy comment or two (thus appearing a dilettante), or being sucked back into the quagmire of Biblical Studies and aborting the attempt to perceive the 'big picture' of the Bible to which Biblical Theology aspires (thereby becoming a failure). I am put in mind of Lord Clark's BBC television series 'Civilisation' in 1969, which attempted to convey the broad sweep of Western culture. My lecturer in Anglo-Saxon history, culture and literature was outraged by Clark's characterisation of the period between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Normans as the Dark Ages. His revisionist course was entitled 'The Heroic Age'. No doubt Clark trod on the toes of innumerable historians, art-historians, philosophers and other subject-specialists. Nonetheless, as a young undergraduate, I was grateful for his temerity and would wish for more of it in myself and others. My own quite conscious decision is to touch lightly on contentious issues and risk being thought an ignoramus rather than abandon the quest for the overall picture.

²³ See W.G. Kümmel's trenchant question: "How is it to be explained that our Christianity differs so widely from the Pauline one that we actually recognize ourselves in the picture of the Pauline non-Christian?" cited in J.Lambrecht, *The Wretched 'I' and Its Liberation: Paul in Romans 7 and 8* (Louvain: Peeters Press/Eerdmans, 1992), 88.

divine (Heb 1:3) and fully human (Heb 2:17) Son and high priest. None either about the total efficacy of the ultimate and unrepeatable sacrifice for sin (Heb 9:26a) or about the completeness of the cleansing and sanctifying of believers achieved by that death. Thus Heb 10:14 declares that “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” The author calls upon his readers to lay aside sin and follow in Jesus’ footsteps (Heb 12:1-2), to accept God’s fatherly discipline (Heb 12:5-11), to pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). What Christ has done *for* them must be matched by what they allow him to do *in* them. There must be a real and not just a relative change.

It is an interesting challenge to consider how much sin the apostle John would have tolerated in the Johannine community. Certainly there appears to be no acceptance of anything less than true doctrine and holy living in the letters to the seven churches in Asia. The avowed intention of the First Epistle is that the readers may not sin. The battle lines between light and darkness drawn by earlier Jewish apocalyptists are clear.²⁴ In this last hour (I Jn 2:18), marked by antichrists and lawlessness, the devil and his children are on one side; God and his children on the other. Sinning is natural for the former group; it is unnatural for the latter group. God’s ‘*sperma*’, God’s seed, abides in his children. The metaphor, if a sexual one, is consistent with the new birth metaphor in John 3. Its implication is that holy living is not only possible but natural for the child of God, because the child bears what we in this generation might call the father’s genetic blueprint.

The Petrine letters also have a great deal to say about the need for the people of God to be holy—which involves escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of passion and becoming partakers of the divine nature (II Pet 1:3-4). In chapter 3 verses 11 and 12, having referred to the imminence of the coming day of the Lord, the author writes: “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God ...?”

Conclusion

²⁴ See Raymond Brown: “In Jewish apocalyptic expectation the final period would be without sin on the part of those who were close to God.” *The Epistles of John: The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 415.

Typical of many scholars, W.T. Purkiser writes, “God alone is holy in himself. All other holiness is derived from a relationship with Him.”²⁵ To be successful, any relationship requires whole-hearted commitment on both sides, e.g. a marriage. In this case it requires God to give himself fully to his people and his people to respond fully to him. It is hard to see what more God could have given than the Torah, his Son and his Spirit. It is easy on the other hand to see what God has always demanded in return. Jesus’ restatement of the greatest commandment cannot be bettered. God has always required wholehearted love of himself and of our neighbour here and now in this life.

Besides an unclouded relationship with himself, which is both gift and requirement, God lays other ethical demands on his people. Worship of God requires acceptability to him – having clean hands and pure hearts. Fellowship with God requires compatibility with him – being holy as he is holy. Mission for God requires resemblance to him – representing him accurately.

The story of God ends in the Book of Revelation with the holy God living amongst his holy people in the ultimate holy place, the new Jerusalem come down from heaven.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev 21:22-27).

²⁵ W.T. Purkiser, *Exploring Christian Holiness: Volume One, The Biblical Foundations* (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), 19. In similar vein J.E. Hartley writes, “Because only Yahweh is intrinsically holy, any person or thing is holy only as it stands in relationship to him. Thus there are degrees of holiness depending on the proximity of an item or person to Yahweh.” *Word Biblical Commentary: Leviticus* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1992), lvii.

A holy God among a holy people in a holy place – the enduring eschatological hope of the Scriptures, God’s ultimate purpose for his world, not just in the far-off future but here and now and always.²⁶

²⁶ As Christopher Rowland says, “To be holy is one of the consequences of the new life in Christ which enabled the believer to enter that new relationship with God which the coming of Jesus Christ made possible.” J. Rogerson, C. Rowland & B. Lindars, *The Study and Use of the Bible* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1988), 199.