

GOD'S HOLINESS. A REAPPRAISAL OF TRANSCENDENCE

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Abstract

This paper attempts a cross-examination of divine holiness and transcendence. Contemporary continental philosophy shows both concern and embarrassment when dealing with God's transcendence. It is often interpreted as an exclusion from this world. The underlying projection belongs to some residual Deism of our age. By analyzing three biblical accounts of holiness (Hosea 11; Isaiah 6; Exodus 3), this paper proposes a requalification of transcendence according to the narratives through which it is revealed and addressed to three specific partners of God. Ultimately, holiness proves to be the transforming power of God.

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, God is often designated as the Almighty. God is located in heaven, or even beyond the heavens (Ps. 115:3). God exceeds and watches over God's entire creation. God sits in heaven on a very high throne (Isa. 6:1). God thus seems to have the features of separation and hierarchy which are valid among beings of the world: altitude, distance. However, the Hebrew Bible never understood such an elevation of God in a way that might contradict God's proximity toward the ones who are humiliated:

For thus says the high and lofty one
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble,
and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isa. 57:15)¹

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¹See Richard Bauckham, "God Crucified," in *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 35–7.

The true God is both very high and very near, different and intimate, free and committed, especially toward those who are humble.

In this paper, I will try to articulate in a simple way the following thesis, to be enriched along the way: as it is revealed, God's holiness allows a critique of a superficial conception of transcendence, understood as a projective difference. Such a misconception is a symptom of some form of Deism that has been assimilated by our imagination.

When we think of God's holiness, we cannot escape the injunctions of Leviticus. Holiness requires separating spaces, as well as rituals of consecration and purification. God alone is holy, undoubtedly; but God invites the members of his people to become holy as well, through all kinds of practices and observances. The major justification of those practices proves to be highly theological:

For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth. For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy. (Lev. 11:44–45)²

The entire pedagogy of ritual holiness is related to Exodus, the salvific event which grounds the covenant, with its requirements in terms of membership. The self-designation of God as holy makes use of a long-lasting paradox: holiness requires separations and, at the same time, it tends to be shared.³

Let us keep in mind the prescriptive character of ritual holiness, while paying attention to specific narratives of holiness: Hosea 11; Isaiah 6; Exodus 3. At the outset, it is necessary to sketch in philosophical terms what we would like to overcome in a theological way.

1. Aporia and Philosophical Approximations

Contemporary continental philosophy shows both concern and embarrassment when dealing with God's transcendence. How to consider it properly? How far to push it? A somewhat perverse outcome is to make God completely external, or even contrary, to our field of existence and perception. Let us consider two examples and a counter-example.

According to the philosopher of religion Ingolf U. Dalfherth, God cannot be present in the world, because of God's difference, except by mode of a total worldly absence. To be present in some coordinates of the world would be contrary to God as God. This thesis might be a philosophical integration of an effective revelation of the divine in the form of its opposite.⁴ But does not setting up such an inseparable equation between divine presence and worldly absence require the implicit admission

² See Lev. 19:2; 20:7,26; 22:33; 25:38; 26:45; Ezek. 40–48.

³ See Walter Vogels, *Célébration et sainteté : Le Lévitique* (Paris: Cerf, 2015), 113–4, 174–5.

⁴ See Ingolf U. Dalfherth, "God, Time, and Orientation: 'Presence' and 'Absence' in Religious and Everyday Discourse," in *The Presence and Absence of God: Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*. Conference 2008, ed. Ingolf U. Dalfherth (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 1–20. For a more subtle dialectic of presence and absence, see Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977), 71, 81, 137, 246, 478–9.

that God cannot combine God's divine presence with *any* kind of in-worldly presence, because God's utterly singular mode of presence enters into conflict with *all* the modes of presence of the subjects or objects of this world? God and the world are mutually exclusive. Paradoxically, the assumption of such a vision is that God is still considered as a subject or an object of this world. God has been removed from the world and, consequently, is unable to come into this world, without being in direct competition with other subjects or objects of the world.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, a friend of Jacques Derrida, the divine is never given under the mode of presence, but is rather like an echo, at the time of a passage, of an event: the footstep of the passerby in the hallway (*le pas du passant dans le passage*).⁵ The discourse of transcendence is eventually shaped into a post-Heideggerian poetry of the ineffable, under the prohibition of any connection between God and being or presence. Again, any presence of God in this world is to be excluded. Nevertheless, something divine continues to provoke disquietude in the thinker. The refusal to turn the "divine" or "grace" into an object does not equate to an affirmation of pure absence.

On the other hand, there are currently some other philosophical attempts to approach the transcendence of God in such a way that God's infinite qualitative difference is not made exclusive of some mode of presence. Here is an example. According to Jean-Yves Lacoste, we are familiar with some things which transcend their present mode of appearing. Perceiving implies a synthesis of adequate and inadequate perception. Perfect and integral perception is only some ideal, since we always perceive phenomena in temporal and partial ways, by multiplying visual angles and by superposing memories. That which appears to us always leaves some space for what does not appear at all or does not yet appear. "No perception of the visible without a co-perception of the invisible," contends Lacoste.⁶

Relying on such a qualification of ordinary perception, it becomes possible to consider that God cannot be labeled only as "wholly other." Admittedly, we do not have at the present time a direct intuition of God, which would make God familiar to us, "phenomenologically" speaking. Such an "intuition" would coincide with the eschatological "vision." But it is possible that God may appear and make himself present to our conscience or in the world, while remaining invisible and transcendent, because God is perceptible first of all as lovable, and is always greater than any of his modes of manifestation.

Out of this brief philosophical *status quaestionis*, I gather some hope that God may not be condemned to be the opposite of the world. However, we still have to elucidate somehow the pre-comprehension which inclines moderns to exclude God spontaneously from the world or to prohibit God from being present therein.

2. Imaginative Transcendence: Residual Deism

Since the seventeenth century, we tend to think of transcendence as a separation and distance from the world. This would constitute the opposite of immanence: the more

⁵ See Jean-Luc Nancy, "On a Divine Wink," in *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 104–20.

⁶ See Jean-Yves Lacoste, "Perception, transcendance, connaissance de Dieu," in *La phénoménalité de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 33–54, here 38.

God becomes transcendent, the less God is close and intimate. The qualities of the wholly Other are then likely to be simple projective negations. Such a pre-comprehension is probably rooted in a univocal representation of being, valid both for God and the common being, or a univocal conception of God's attributes and of the world's properties. As soon as God and the created realm fall into a common genre, God's transcendence is represented as an exclusion from this world.⁷

Our imaginary deism is a coherent translation of the equation: being of God ≈ (separated) being of beings of the world. Detached from the world, God is described, as in a mirror, as some hypertrophied worldly object, extracted from the world. The autonomy of God is ensured by a distance and a disconnection. The criteria of transcendence are altitude, separation, dissociation of places, absence of contact, self-sufficiency and independence, etc. In order to free God of any relation with the world or action in the world, our imagination projects upon God a mode of worldly existence, pushed to a maximum isolation.

Such an understanding of transcendence is called "contrastive": transcendence becomes the opposite of immanence. This view stems from a projection upon God of the mode of being of these realities of the world which cannot exist at the same time out of and within another reality of the world.⁸ Such a projection made upon God is radically false. Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas or Jean Calvin spontaneously conceived God's transcendence in a way correlative with God's intimate presence within any creature or with God's intimate action in the freedom of the justified ones.

This is not my principal concern here, but I could illustrate this correlation by showing that, in the "Prima Pars" of the *Summa Theologiae*, the question dealing with God's presence in all things mirrors the question about God's simplicity. The sharpest transcendence results in the sharpest and most active intimacy, and it does so reciprocally.⁹ Thanks to his transcendence, God acts in the most intimate depths of creatures, without entering into competition with their own autonomy in being and acting. The same effect can be entirely set up by divine action *and* entirely result from a causality of the world, without any partition of efficiencies. This is what happens in petitionary prayer. The divine operation should not be equated with the first of causalities of the world; it is an action of another kind, of an incommensurable effectiveness, crossing without confusion all the causal chains of the world, whether they are necessary or contingent.¹⁰

A requalification of God's transcendence needs to be freed from the paradigm whereby transcendence and immanence are taken as alternatives. Several approaches are possible to address the imaginary deism which overpowers language about God.

⁷ See William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), esp. 111–27; Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 89. Olivier Boulnois, *Être et représentation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 223–91.

⁸ The participation theory might bypass what remains, at first sight, a worldly impossibility; see Thomas Aquinas, *In II Metaphysicorum*, lect. 2 (Rome: Marietti, 1950), #292.

⁹ See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I^a, q. 3 and q. 8; q. 43, a. 3, resp.; II^a-II^{ae}, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2; q. 17, a. 5, resp.; q. 23, a. 3 and 6.

¹⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 70 et 72; Pasquale Porro, "Lex necessitatis vel contingentiae. Necessità, contingenza e provvidenza nell'universo di Tommaso d'Aquino," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 96, no. 3 (2012): 401–50; Emmanuel Durand, "The Gospel of Prayer and Theories of Providence," *The Thomist* 78 (2014): 519–36.

I now leave aside the philosophical debate, because I would like to pay attention to some testimonies of the Hebrew Bible on God's holiness. If God's transcendence is requalified in terms of holiness, it appears as divine self-declaration which initiates the deployment of specific stories. Our working hypothesis will be that the revelation of God's holiness is correlative of a commitment, a presence and a mission.

3. From Holiness to Transcendence, in Three Stages

Let us focus on three biblical accounts of holiness: Hosea 11; Isaiah 6; Exodus 3. The aim is to discern how some parameter of "transcendence" intervenes and functions in these three narratives. We are led to recognize that God does not reveal God's holiness in an isolated way, simply in itself, but holiness steps in like one of the features of God's relational identity, for the sake of an interpellation or a mission which directly matters for God's partners.

3.1. "I am God and no mortal" and "the Holy One in your midst" (Hos. 11:9)

The book of Hosea depicts God's love for his people through the prophet's marriage and the adventures of his marital alliance with Gomer, his wife. The life of the prophet is a living parable of God's relation with his people. To this first image is added a second one: that of the parental love for a rebel son. In two fields, both within the household, divine love is tested and proves to be victorious. God would have so many good reasons to withdraw his love, but God does not do so. God's love supplants God's anger, even if punishments are effective, for a curative purpose. God always wants to reconquer God's people by means of love, with some kind of detoxication of sin.

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1). Through Exodus, unique relations of paternity and filiation between God and Israel were revealed (Exod. 4:22–23). The only reason for election is a loving and free predilection. In Deuteronomy, this theology of election as love finds a full development.¹¹

With election in the background (i.e. a paramount call), Israel's behavior is incomprehensible to God. God speaks through the prophet as a rejected lover: "The more I called them, the more they went from me" (Hos. 11:2). The reiteration of the calling by the prophets, i.e. by the Lord himself, only deepened the rejection of the chosen people, as they drifted further into idolatry and unfaithfulness.

The depiction of divine love follows both paternal and maternal features, suffused with deep tenderness and closeness. God taught his people how to walk; God carried them against his cheek; God leaned toward them to feed them (Hos. 11:3–4).¹² The evocation of this tenderness of the past makes the verdict all the more striking: the people might not return to Egypt,¹³ out of which God drew them once for all, but they will know a new slavery, no less harsh: "Assyria shall be their king, because

¹¹ See Deut. 4:37; 7:7–9,13; 10:15; 23:16; Carsten Vang, "God's love according to Hosea and Deuteronomy: A prophetic reworking of a Deuteronomic concept?", *Tyndale Bulletin* 62, no. 2 (2011): 173–94.

¹² In Hebrew, it remains tricky to choose between parental love and animal taming; see J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 282–5.

¹³ It is only one of the possible readings of Hebrew; see J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, 285. NRSV reads "They shall return to the land of Egypt."

they have refused to return to me" (Hos. 11:5). Again, love does not exclude punishments with a healing dimension. While a new Exodus remains an object of hope, trials and sorrows are experienced through the historical tribulations of Israel.

Though the people are guilty without any doubt, and although punishments are truly deserved, God cannot take on the destruction of his child, like a father whose heart and bowels are in turmoil while considering that he would have to destroy his most beloved offspring:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart (*leb*) recoils within me;
 my compassion (*nichum*) grows warm and tender.
 I will not execute my fierce anger;
 I will not again destroy Ephraim;
 for I am God and no mortal (*enosh*),
 I am God and no mortal,
 and I will not come in wrath. (Hos. 11:8–9)

Admah and Zeboiim were destroyed at the same time as Sodom and Gomorrah (Deut. 29:33). According to the image of parental love, God cannot embrace a justified yet destructive punishment. Jewish Law requires from parents that they punish their rebel son, in theory until death by stoning in the event of non-repentance (Deut. 21:18–21).¹⁴ God lives a kind of interior reversal of this law: his parental compassion overcomes his anger, although his anger is well grounded and legitimate.

I would like to point this out: in Hosea, while love allows for a comparison between human and divine feelings, anger calls for a clear differentiation: "I am God and no mortal (*enosh*)."¹⁵ It would be so human to give way to a wave of anger, despite the intimate demands of parental love. In his anger, God actually appears very different from human beings: "his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime" (Ps. 30:5).

"I am God and no mortal." Is this the last word of the Bible concerning transcendence? Not quite. Let us consider other divine reversals.¹⁵ We are forced to recognize that the biblical data about divine repentance (*nacham*) include contrary statements, such as "God does repent" or "God does not repent," which are justified by the same fundamental assertion: "[God] is not a mortal (*adam*)" (1 Sam. 15:29; see Num. 23:19). The meaning of metaphors and propositions thus depends above all on the

¹⁴ See Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, vol. 1: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 112–6; Bo H. Lim and Daniel Castelo, *Hosea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 171.

¹⁵ See Gen. 6:6–7; Exod. 32:7–14; Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:10–35; Jer. 18:5–10; 26:1–6; Joel 2:12–14; Jonah 3–4; Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God. A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10, no. 1 (1988): 47–70; Jean-Pierre Sonnet, "Dieu sauve l'histoire comme en sous-main. La rhétorique des amendements divines," in *Raconter Dieu. Entre récit, histoire et théologie*, ed. Christian Dionne (Brussels: Lessius, 2014), 173–96; Thomas Römer, "Yhwh peut-il changer d'avis? Arbitraire, colère, repentir, compassion divins dans la Bible hébraïque," in *Colères et repentirs divins*, ed. Jean-Marie Durand (Fribourg-Göttingen: Academic Press-Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 313–24.

stories with which they are involved. That presupposes a distinction between a rhetorical acceptance of metaphor as substitution, and a semantic use of metaphor as interaction.¹⁶

It is not possible to infer that God cannot repent, because God is not like human beings. This would be contradicted by many biblical accounts. It is only advisable to support this: when God does repent, God does not repent as a human being would. It could even happen, in some situations, that God repents precisely because God is not like a human being. According to the syntax of the passage, this is what occurs in Hos. 11:8–9.

In the Hebrew Bible, the proposition “God is not a mortal/human being” expresses well the qualitative difference between God’s ways and human behaviors, but it does not offer a simple criterion to honor all at once God’s transcendence vis-à-vis the uncertainties of metaphorical language. We have to seek further. For Hosea, among explanations of the divine reversal, “the Holy One in your midst” is affixed with “I am God and no mortal.” Beyond the difference between God and human beings, holiness is revealed as the most positive index of God’s identity. Surprisingly, “the Holy One” is introduced by “in your midst” (Hos. 11:9).

This declaration is of extraordinary density, as it weaves four elements together: the divine “I am”; holiness as a nominalized adjective; God’s dwelling within his people; and his renunciation of destructive wrath. Isn’t this the program of a new Exodus?

From a narrative point of view, it is God’s holiness which dispossesses divine anger of its potential excess. Holiness turns God toward his unfaithful people in a different way. Beyond punishments balanced by his love, the Holy One is about to achieve, not the destruction of his people, but a broader reiteration of Exodus. This new Exodus will be achieved not only from Egypt, but also from Assyria (Hos. 11:11). The sons of Israel will be gathered from all the nations where they were dispersed and alienated (Isa. 11:11–16; 19:23–25).

Let us recapitulate. The story is built through a confrontation between a disappointed love and God’s anger towards his people/rebellious son. The resolution of the conflict is clear: love prevails over anger.¹⁷ The justification of love overcoming anger delivers a sharp theological equation:

habitation & incorporation ←	<u>I am God and no mortal</u> <u>in your midst [I am]</u> <u>the Holy One</u>	→ qualitative difference
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At both extremities, “[I am] the Holy One” responds to “I am God.” Holiness is the peak of God’s identity. At the center, the assertion of difference is worked out

¹⁶ See Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics” (1972), in *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 95–110; “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” in *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (1978): 143–59.

¹⁷ This contention is valid in the frame of this narrative. It could not be extended as a general theological principle, for at least two reasons: 1) in some narratives of the Old Testament, divine wrath prevails over mercy or comes back later; 2) as long as the final judgment has not taken place, an “eschatological reservation” has to be maintained, even though theological boldness is grounded in the cross and resurrection.

right away in terms of presence and indwelling. This first narrative approach of divine holiness can be supplemented by two other major accounts; in both the human subject is given a mission.

3.2. Function and Transfer of Holiness in Isaiah's Calling (Isaiah 6:1–13)

Let us consider the vision which is usually called the "vocation of Isaiah," where God's holiness and glory intervene. We pay attention to the sequences of narration and action. For Joseph Blenkinsopp, the scene begins by exposing the mandate given to the prophet for a specific mission, in the context of the threat of an imminent invasion (i.e. the "Syro-Ephraimite War"). This political and religious mission is doomed, but the vision and the dialogue reveal that this failure is anticipated and controlled by God.¹⁸ In the long run, a radical purification of Judah, which probably hints at the double deportation, will make possible the resurgence of an authentic holiness, thanks to a reactivation of separations between Israel and other peoples (see Ezra 9:2).

Isa. 6:1–13	Staging
¹ In the year that King Uzziah died,	Timely and symbolic indication
I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.	VISION
² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.	
³ And one called to another and said: " <u>Holy, holy, holy</u> is the LORD [YHWH] of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."	Holiness & glory in excess
⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.	Reaction of the setting
⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips;	Reaction of the seer
yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD [YHWH] of hosts!"	... face to the only true King
⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has	Purification for speech

¹⁸ See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 223–4; at a distance from Jacques Vermeylen, *Le Livre d'Isaïe. Une cathédrale littéraire* (Paris: Cerf, 2014), 61–70; Vermeylen considers that the original text stops at v. 9 and that the mission was at first depicted as a positive one.

Isa. 6:1–13	Staging
touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."	
⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"	DIALOGUE Divine calling and prophet's readiness Sending and revelation of the mission's outcome
⁹ And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' ¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."	
¹¹ Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; ¹² until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. ¹³ Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled." The <u>holy seed</u> is its stump.	Reaction of the prophet in the face of such a difficult mission By a deep cleansing, holiness will be restored; see Isa. 4:3; Ezra 9:2

The death of king Uzziah acquires here a symbolic value of pride and suspension of human royalty (2 Chron. 26; 2 Kings 15:1–7). The only kingship which holds fast is that of the Lord, and the prophet is made witness of this. The revelation of the holiness and the glory of God is highly dramatic. The effect of remote distancing is accentuated by the solemnity of the framework, the elevation of the throne, the mediation of seraphim, the theophanic demonstrations (see Exod. 19:18).

Responding to the unveiling of God's holiness and to the saturating effect of divine glory, the remote distancing is transposed in the conscience and the speech of the seer: conscious of the gulf between his vision of the holiness of God and his own sinful condition, he is seized by fear. His impurity is incompatible with the vision. To gaze at what he sees requires a purification of his lips and exposes him to death. This is consistent with the mandate of dangerously truthful speech which he is about to receive. The word of the prophet cannot adjust by itself in conformity with the vision. He must undergo a treatment, very simple but external to him, so that his word can flow out anew, without fear.

These various effects, almost crushing, of holiness and transcendence are oriented toward a direct dialogue, a face-to-face conversation. The revelation is then indirect, mediated by the seraphim, but the Lord's voice, though high and exalted, opens a

call and awaits a response.¹⁹ The question launched by the Lord is disconcerting, compared to the sovereignty expressed just before through the vision. But the Lord's voice is addressed to the seer; it establishes a relation that the vision and the theophany, as such, do not authorize.

In an original way, when the voice takes over visual theophany, the revelation of holiness and glory becomes the background of an alliance of mission and the warrant of the authority of the envoy. This appears all the more necessary as the mission consists in an announcement of seclusion and misfortune: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand" (*Isa. 6:9*). According to human standards, such a mission will lead the prophet to inevitable failure and rejection.

In other words, the economy of holiness and divine transcendence (as loftiness and glory) is ordained toward a covenant of mission which requires a human response. The response comes from a man who has become aware of his distance from God, when faced with the saturating effect of God's holiness. The very holiness of God has been manifested in order to give way to a simple dialogue and a dangerous mission. The mission happens to be so harsh and trying that it requires a high preliminary warrant, in order to be embraced, in spite of a predictable human and religious failure.

By the end of this sequence, the depiction of Isaiah's mission hints at some purification of the remnant of the people, which would once again be capable of encountering the holiness stemming from God. Just as Isaiah had to be purified, the people will be purified by God, beyond their deafness and closed minds which seem to prevail and block God's work. The adjective "holy" (*qadosh*) comes back significantly at the end of the Lord's response to Isaiah's question, "How long?" Surreptitiously, a transfer and a communication are considered: from God's holiness on his lofty throne to the people's holiness, though the latter has been reduced and stripped on several occasions, until it is wholly destitute. An astonishing and demanding correspondence is established between the proclamation of God's holiness, the prophet's mission, and the remote horizon of that mission as the transformation of God's people.

If the reader looks at the narrative from a distance, two cross displacements are revealed. On the one hand, the extinction of the ambivalent kingship of Uzziah gives space for a full manifestation of the true King. On the other hand, the grandiose proclamation of the Holy One grounds and anticipates a resurgence of holiness, still remote, in the ultimate remainder of the people, stripped from sin at the root. These two movements have an intense zone of overlapping in the vision of Isaiah. Though they are highly elevated, God's kinship and holiness are connected with Judah's tribulations and vocation.

3.3. The Excess of Divine Names in Moses' Calling (Exod. 3:1–15)

If we return to the Pentateuch with Hos. 11 and Isa. 6 as our criteria, we may note that the first occurrence of *qadosh* employed to mean "holy" places the reader in front of the burning bush.²⁰ The account of Moses' vocation, in Exod. 3, can be analyzed by following the sequence of God's actions and his interaction with the prophet.

¹⁹ Thanks to his purification, the prophet might attend a divine council; see Vermeylen, *Le Livre d'Isaïe*, 66.

²⁰ See art. "*qdš*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 12:521–45, here 529.

Intrigued by the flame of the bush, Moses does not recognize the angel of YHWH at first sight. He comes closer with inner questions about this "great sight" (Exod. 3:1–2). From there, the divine interpellation introduces a dialogue, out of which we highlight divine inputs and significant sequences.

Relation established by call/response	"Moses, Moses"/"Here I am" (4)
Separation and holiness	"Come no closer" + "holy ground" (5)
Relative identity, related to the fathers	"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (6a)
Moses' fear	"Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (6b)
God's actions for the sake of his people	to observe, hear, know, come down, deliver, bring out of that land... (7–9)
Sending of Moses	"I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (10)
Moses resistance and question of legitimacy	"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (11)
Committed identity and sign on hold Moses' request: using another name	"I will be with you" (12)
Identity in excess ≈ riddle Reiteration of the name, warrant of mission	"If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (13)
Tetragrammaton/relative identity	"I am who I am" (14a)
This very name (YHWH), to be used for invocation	"I am has sent me to you" (14b)
	"the LORD [YHWH], the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you" (15b)
	"This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations" (15c)

From the start, the account of Moses' calling sets up a relation, by means of interpellation and response, as the frame wherein appears the excess of singularity which characterizes YHWH. If we name it transcendence, this singularity is not a pure distance, but a personal difference, somewhat enigmatic, revealed as a parameter of the relation that God establishes with his envoy, for the sake of his people.

The sequences of the narrative show how rich and integral is the revelation of the divine "I am." The name expressing the excess of the divine "I am" is preceded by

two relational “I am’s.” First of all, God depicts himself by his predilection and election in relation to the patriarchs: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:6a). Then, God presents himself by his relation and commitment in respect to Moses: “I will be with you” (Exod. 3:12). The identity in excess, sealed by “I am who I am,” breaks through as the ultimate ground and warrant of an identity which is both relational and committed.

The expression “I am who I am” might have several meanings, among which it is not possible to choose in an exclusive way:

- A refusal to reveal himself beyond what is necessary for the mission: I am who I am;
- A self-declaration of transcendence which legitimates the sending: I am that which is;
- A self-declaration of eternity in the form of an active promise: I will be who I will be.

It would be misleading to think of the third reading as dismissing the second one. The enigmatic character of the divine name is an indication of his identity in excess, in respect to both functional and ontological approaches.²¹ The reiteration of “I am who I am” in the simple form of an absolute “I am,” without any predicate, is significant. It suggests a priority of the ontological dimension over the functional one, as the former is the foundation and the warrant for the latter. The whole economy of the scene justifies the articulation of these two dimensions.

While the divine “I am” is a name in excess of meaning, probably combining absolute existence, withdrawal and promise, the Tetragrammaton is delivered as equivalent to a “first name” of highly singular self-presentation. Within the framework of a first encounter, to answer the question “what is your name?,” it would not be fitting that I simply reply “I am human” (a name of essence), or “I am who I am” (a unique and sealed existence). I would also have to deliver my very first name: “Emmanuel,” because my first name indicates my incommunicable and irreplaceable singularity. The communication of the (vocalized) Tetragrammaton to Moses conveys a similar unveiling of God’s singularity, without recourse to formal signifying content.²²

At the end of the narrative, God presents himself again as the God of the patriarchs. Ultimately, several designations are closely tied: “I am who I am/I am,” “YHWH,” “the God of your father/the God of your ancestors,” “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” These names are of various origins.²³ Beyond the identification of the subject receiving these different names, which one of

²¹ See Paul Ricoeur and André LaCocque, *Penser la Bible* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 305–71.

²² See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I^a, q. 13, a. 9, resp. (in fine): “Si vero esset aliquod nomen impositum ad significandum Deum non ex parte naturae, sed ex parte suppositi, secundum quod consideratur ut hoc aliquid, illud nomen esset omnibus modis incommunicabilis: sicut forte est nomen Tetragrammaton apud Hebraeos.” (“However, if there were a name imposed to signify God not on the part of the nature but on the part of the suppositum – i.e., insofar as He is thought of as a this-something (*hoc aliquid*) – then that name would not be shareable in any way at all, as perhaps is the case with God’s four-letter name [tetragrammaton] among the Hebrews.”) See also q. 13, a. 11, resp. and ad 1; Thomas J. White, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 39–44.

²³ See Thomas Römer, “The Revelation of the Divine Name to Moses and the Construction of a Memory About the Origins of the Encounter Between Yhwh and Israel,” in *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Thomas E. Levy (Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 305–15.

them is meant for invocation? According to Hos. 12:6, the name of God's singularity, YHWH, is to be used as God's invocation.²⁴

The stage of the absolute "I am" is one moment, decisive but non-isolable, of a more complete revelation. It breaks through in the history of the covenant, with the election of the fathers. It aims in priority at convincing and equipping Moses for his mission for the sake of the people. The identity of the self-revealed God to Moses is not limited to his transcendence. The enigmatic singularity of God is brought forth for the sake of covenant and mission. It is framed by the memory of election and a promise of fidelity.

4. Back to Revealed Transcendence

Through Hosea 11, Isaiah 6, and Exodus 3, we have detected certain modalities of God's self-presentation and commitment, in relation with the theme of holiness. Let us consider, consequently, an adjusted qualification of transcendence in the field of systematic theology. The three narratives have something to do with prophecy and worship. How should we move from these contexts to some rational discourse? Though theological thinking has some specificities, it should not become alien to modes of discourse drawn from prayer, invocation, and worship.

From a theological point of view, transcendence is revealed, and not postulated or reached by mode of intuition or argumentation. Admittedly, it is possible to reach some truth about God's transcendence *via* philosophical or experiential routes. Think, for example, of the various types of rational arguments that seek to prove God's existence.²⁵ But, by means of natural reasoning, one might never reach true divine transcendence. This has become obvious in the residual Deism which underlies our imaginative thinking as late moderns. We tend to project a god detached from this world as if he were a hypertrophied object extracted from the world, with all the features of in-worldly separations: distance, exclusion, abstraction, non-relation, etc.

To foster a theological discourse on God's transcendence, it is advisable to start from a decisive and self-obvious event: God's transcendence is revealed by Godself through words and theophanies which are addressed to real human beings. This means from the start that transcendence is not posited as a pure separation; otherwise it would not be a matter of communication addressed to humans by God. As it is revealed, transcendence matters greatly for those to whom revelation is addressed. It has a decisive connection with their mode of being in relation to God and their ways in a profane world.

In the two narratives of vocation, that of Isaiah and that of Moses, God's holiness or identity is revealed as one parameter of his singularity, within the framework of covenant and mission. God's self-presentation or self-designation is one decisive moment of God's covenant with his prophets, in order to ground, qualify, and warrant their missions. The unveiling of God's sealed identity is neither first nor

²⁴ According to Gen. 4:26, the Tetragrammaton is first employed by Seth to invoke God. From a narrative perspective, see Jean-Pierre Sonnet, "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14): God's 'Narrative Identity' among Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise," *Poetics Today* 31, no. 2 (2010): 331–51. The author sheds some light on the *idem per idem* self-presentation, which entails either indetermination or intensification.

²⁵ See Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," in *Alvin Plantinga: God's Philosopher*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 203–27.

ultimate in the economy of revelation. It presupposes election and it strengthens the covenant. It is highly fitting that God comes close and introduces himself as the God of the fathers, so that the accentuation of his enigmatic transcendence could not be reduced to a pure negative conceptual moment.

The transcendence thus expressed in the context of the covenant, and for the sake of the covenant, can be precisely called a “relational transcendence,” distinct from an “absolute transcendence” which would be a pure distance from the world and would be reduced eventually to a “contrastive transcendence,” a false opposite of immanence.

Seeking to reach a proper theological appraisal of God’s transcendence, the route suggested in this paper supports the following assertions:

- Transcendence is not the separation of a divine “object” projected out of world;
- Revealed transcendence is relational, within a reciprocal though asymmetrical relation;
- When God reveals a facet of his holiness, he expects and causes a response;
- God’s holiness grounds separations in the perspective of a transformation;
- Divine holiness and “I am” are ground and warrant of highly difficult missions;
- Transcendence is one parameter of God’s revealed identity, not the whole of it;
- Election and covenant set the framework for a right apprehension of transcendence.

Finally, considering God’s transcendence through the lens of holiness raises a recurring question concerning the best “use” of biblical revelation. As Westerners, we are drawn to question the essence, existence, and identity of God, from a theoretical angle. We are satiated with theological and epistemic concerns about God. With such an orientation, we tend to regard revelation as a window on the divine realm and to interpret it as an unveiling of God’s intimacy.

In other cultural spheres, biblical testimony is questioned differently, starting from traumatic collective stories which are closer to those of the chosen people: oppression, precariousness, wandering, deportation, culpability, etc. What is at stake with the biblical testimony appears more practical than theoretical in these contexts.²⁶ Thus, the quest for identity follows a more decisive question: to what extent is God engaged in respect to us in our tormented stories?

This is primarily how biblical testimonies should be received. Nevertheless, God’s identity is delivered as the warrant of God’s steadfast commitment. This is the main conclusion of our cross-examination of divine holiness and transcendence. To elucidate further the specifically Christian dimension of God’s holiness, it would be necessary to consider its incarnated figure and its Trinitarian form.²⁷ According to John’s Gospel, the “I am” of Christ was already present in the burning bush.

Here is our suggestion. Having a quick look at the word “holy” in the New Testament proves to be astonishing. In the Gospels and Acts, Jesus is designated as “holy” (*hagios*), but with limited extension: he will be called “holy” (Luke 1:35), he is

²⁶ See Eep Talstra, “Exile and Pain: A Chapter from the Story of God’s Emotions,” in *Exile and Suffering*, ed. Bob Becking (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 161–80.

²⁷ See John B. Webster, “The Holiness and Love of God,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 3 (2004): 249–68.

identified as "the Holy One of God" by demons (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34), and he is confessed as such by Peter (John 6:69); he is also designated as the "holy servant" of God by the same Apostle (Acts 4:27). The Father is called "holy" by Jesus in his last prayer (John 17:11). Then, one is forced to observe that the Spirit encapsulates holiness in the New Testament. The Spirit steps forward as the divine agent who bears and conveys holiness. As revealed by the initial blessing of Eph. 1, the saints have been filled with all spiritual blessings in Christ. The Spirit of Christ is always the main agent of transformation for the elect.

What is God's holiness? According to both Testaments, it is the transforming power of God. Such a power entails a distance, but its deep reality is the very power which has raised Jesus up from the dead. God is the only One who calls into existence that which did not exist, grants life where death has overcome it, and sheds overabundant grace where sin abounded. These very acts designate who God is.