

Dangerous Holiness: “Whatever touches X shall be holy.” (Exod. 29:37 etc.)

Working manuscript. Peter Schmidt. 2022.

1. Introduction

There is a key statement that occurs a few times, but is grammatically ambiguous. In Exod. 29:37, we read:

כָּל־הַנִּגַּע בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ יִקְדָּשׁ *kol-hannōgē(a) ‘ bammizbē(a)h yiqdāš.*

With variations, such a statement occurs in Exod. 29:37; 30:29; Lev. 6:11 [English18]; Lev. 6:20 [English 27]. Closely related are Ezek. 44:19 and 46:20.

The main question is whether to translate

(1.) “Whatever touches X will [thereby] become holy.”, – a consequence;

or

(2.) “Whatever touches X shall be holy [beforehand].” – a condition.¹

Another question is whether to translate “whatever” or “whoever”.

Apart from the grammatical questions, what is the concept behind the warning, and what are the consequences if it is not heeded? Our answer to these questions determines how we translate “will become holy”. There are a number of related difficult issues which I will not venture to address. I will concentrate on this sentence.

2. Summary

- Probably, option (1.) above is correct: “Whatever touches X will become holy.”
- But “becoming holy” is something negative. For persons, the consequence could be death; for objects, it would mean to be “confiscated”, as it were, by the sanctuary – reserved for usage there, or destruction[?].
- In translation, the danger has to be communicated, although being specific is difficult.

3. Relevant references

The idea that holiness is dangerous, and the question of how holiness is transmitted, surfaces in the following places:

- Exod. 19:12-13 says people must not touch Mount Sinai, on pain of death.
- Exod. 29:37 says unauthorized people must not touch the altar.
- Exod. 30:29 says about the most holy objects of the Tabernacle (NASB):
You shall also consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them shall be holy.
- Lev. 6:11 [English 18] says about the grain offering (NASB):

¹ Option (1.) is found in most versions, but in Lev. 6:11, for example, CEV and NET go with option (2.).

Every male among the sons of Aaron may eat it; it is a permanent ordinance throughout your generations, from the offerings by fire to the Lord. Whoever touches them will become consecrated.’

- Lev. 6:20 [English 27] makes a similar statement about the flesh of the purification offering (sin offering).
- Lev. 10:1-2 Nadab and Abihu are killed after bringing an unauthorized offering.
- Num 4:15 states that the Kohathites must not touch the holy things, lest they die.
- 1Sam. 6:19 tells us that people are killed because they looked into the Ark.
- 2Sam 6:6-7 recounts how Uzzah is killed when taking hold of the Ark.
- Ezek. 44:19 says (NASB):

When they [= the Zadokite priests] go out into the outer court, into the outer court to the people, they shall put off their garments in which they have been ministering and lay them in the holy chambers; then they shall put on other garments so that they will not transmit holiness to the people with their garments.
- Ezek. 46:20 makes a similar statement about the baked grain offering.
- Hagg. 2:10-13 (NASB):

¹¹ “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Ask now the priests for a ruling: ¹² If a man carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches bread with this fold, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any other food, will it become holy?’” And the priests answered, “No.” ¹³ Then Haggai said, “If one who is unclean from a corpse touches any of these, will the latter become unclean?” And the priests answered, “It will become unclean.”
- *Related are also Exod. 30:20, Lev. 27, Deut. 22:9, but they are not discussed.*

4. Literature and discussion

Below I offer a compilation of explanations from various resources. This should help in assessing different positions. [All underlining is added.]

4.1. Exodus 29:37

Stuart (NAC, 2006):

The final sentence of v. 37 as it appears in the NIV (and nearly all other English versions) is mistranslated. There is no automatic transfer of holiness by mere contact with a holy object in the Old Covenant. ...

Indeed, the opening point of Haggai’s third oracle (Hag 2:10-19) is based squarely on the fact that while defilement is transferable, holiness is *not*.

Stuart seems right in questioning “automatic sanctification”, because where people infringe on holy objects, they are *killed*. But we might have to distinguish between humans and objects. As to Haggai, again, things are not quite that simple. We might have to distinguish between priests’ clothes and layperson’s clothes, and even between holy meat and most holy meat. And there are other issues as well. Stuart continues:

This is a prescription rather than a description, a requirement that unholy things not be brought into contact with the consecrated altar so as to deconsecrate it and require it to be consecrated all over again.

This makes good sense in the immediate context. However, it does not explain the concern that is expressed in the verses in Ezek. 44:19; 46:20.

4.2. Various commentators' views on Lev 6:11 [English 18]

AOTC (124f.) gives a short overview over the discussion.

Keil (BK 1870, English reprint 1989 p. 319):

Every one that touches them (the most holy offerings) becomes holy.” וְכֹהֵן? does not mean he shall be holy, or shall sanctify himself (LXX, Vulg., Luth., a Lap., etc.), nor he is consecrated to the sanctuary and is to perform service there (Theodor., Knobel, and others). In this provision, which was equally applicable to the sin-offering (ver. 27), to the altar of the burnt-offering (Ex. xxix. 37), and to the most holy vessels of the tabernacle (Ex-xxx. 29), the word is not to be interpreted by Num. xvii. 2, 3, or Deut xxii. 9, or by the expression “shall be holy” in chap. xxvii. 10, 21, and Num. xviii. 10, but by Isa. lxxv.5, “touch me not, for I am holy.” The idea is this, every layman who touched these most holy things became holy through the contact, so that henceforth he had to guard against defilement in the same manner as the sanctified priests (chap. xxi. 1–8), though without sharing the priestly rights and prerogatives. This necessarily placed him in a position which would involve many inconveniences in connection with ordinary life.

Wenham (NICOT, 1979):

Anyone (or anything) who touches them becomes holy (v. 11c [18c]). This is probably meant as a warning to lay people to avoid touching the most holy sacrifices. But it is rather difficult to say what “becoming holy” means in this context. Similar expressions are found in v. 20 (27); Exod. 29:37; 30:29; Deut. 22:9. Elliger explains the phrase as follows: “He enters a state in which anyone who is not a priest trained to act discreetly will soon provoke God’s special wrath against himself. At least he can only free himself from this state by undergoing a special act of purification.”⁷

Certainly Leviticus underlines the dangers attendant on holiness.⁸ Judgment falls when the unclean meets the holy (cf. 7:20; 10:1–3). But this text does not explain how long the state of holiness contracted through contact with a sacrifice lasted or what could be done to make the layman “common” again. Verses 20ff. (27ff.) suggest that the holiness could only be removed by destruction of the object or by washing it. It does not actually refer to deconsecration of people. Ch. 27 does deal with ransoming things and people that have been dedicated to the Lord. Broadly speaking the donor must pay 20 percent extra to redeem his gift. When a Nazirite had fulfilled the period of his vow, he had to be deconsecrated by offering every type of sacrifice save a reparation offering (Num. 6:13–20). Whether either of these procedures was adopted in this instance, where the consecration was involuntary, is doubtful.

⁷ Elliger, p. 97.

⁸ See Introduction, VI.2: “Holiness.”

Levine (JPSTC, 1989) takes a different view. He expresses a condition, translating:

Anyone who is to touch these must be in a holy state.

His comment (against Haran, see there) also mentions Exod. 29 & 30 and Hagg. 2.

– See Hartley below, who summarizes it.

Hartley (WBC, 1992):

Whoever (כל אשר) touches that which is holy must be holy. Many English translations render this line as the RSV does: “Whoever touches them shall become holy.” Levine (37), however, correctly points out that whatever is unclean is contagious, but that which is holy is not. An object is made holy

by being consecrated; therefore, Levine offers a more correct rendering of this line.

Whether or not holiness is contagious, and in what way, is debated.

4.3. Questions regarding Levine's and Hartley's view

- Even if the verb *qdš qal* in Lev. 6:11[18] לְאִשְׁרֵי־יָגַע בָּהֶם יִקְדָּשׁ ‘Who/whatever touches them shall become-holy’ could be interpreted either as 3.-person imperative or as future/consequence, the first is not possible in the logically related last clause of Ezek. 44:19: there, the verb *qdš pi.* strongly suggests a consequence to be avoided: וְלֹא־יִקְדָּשׁוּ אֶת־הָעָם בְּבגְדֵיהֶם ‘so that they will not make-holy the people with their clothes’. The same applies to Ezek. 46:20. It is questionable whether the verse in Lev. should be understood differently.

- The interpretation of Lev. 6:11 [18] has to fit Lev. 6:20 [27]. The verse reads (ESV):

Whatever touches its flesh shall be holy, and when any of its blood is splashed on a garment, you shall wash that on which it was splashed in a holy place.

Here, the flesh and the blood occur in parallel, although they receive differing treatment. Anyway, with regard to the blood, the verse spells out how undesired consequences can be rectified. One would expect that something similar is said about the flesh. To state a condition does not correspond too well to the rest of the verse. Levine only comments:

Should any sacrificial blood stain a garment, that garment must be laundered because it would be improper if any blood of the sacrifice was not used for its only legitimate purpose. ...

Hartley does not offer a satisfying explanation for the beginning of the verse either. In regard to the vessels in v. 21, he speaks about how portions from a sacred offering penetrate into clay- or bronze vessels. That is, he (rightly) discusses what the offering does to those objects. Again, it is not about a condition for touching it.

- Apart from Lev. 6:11/20, לְאִשְׁרֵי *kol* ^{ʿa}*šer* occurs 24 more times in Lev., and it almost always means ‘that which’, not referring to a person. Exceptions are Lev. 15:11; 18:29.

4.4. Milgrom's “Comment B: Sancta Contagion”

(*Leviticus 1–16*, AB, 1991, vol. 1, pp. 443-456) – Some points:

- “Whatever” is how the rabbis understood it.
- Milgrom insists that only the adj. *qādōš* expresses the state. *qdš qal* means “become holy”.² Thus, LXX “shall be holy” (i.e., he has to be a priest) is not valid. ⚡ on Exod. 29:37 “purify oneself” cannot be right either for *qdš qal*.
- M. interprets the Haggai passage as follows (p. 445): “The priest denies that holiness is transmitted through a garment (i.e., at a second remove). Implied, however, is that holiness is contagious *by direct contact*.” – But it only concerns foods stuff.
- (M. makes a difference between the most sacred furniture (in Num 4:15) and the most sacred offerings.)
- The antonymic formula to “shall become holy” is “shall become impure”, as in Lev. 11:24ff.; 15:10ff.

² He could be right, although the evidence is not overwhelming. Apart from the occurrences in the very formula that is under consideration here, there are only seven other cases, and among them Num 17:2 can be read both ways, and 1Sa 21:6; Isa 65:5 are difficult.

- M. discusses whether Ezekiel’s view is a new one. He says it is not consistent with either the Pentateuch or Haggai. [Whether or not Ezekiel introduces a new theology, the translation of the formula is clear.]
- M. says the curtains of the Tabernacle and the garments of the priests do not transmit holiness.
- M.: “The sancta transmit death only to persons and holiness only to objects.”
- M. says the meaning of *kōl* in our texts changed over time. (The priests wanted to reduce the contagious power of the sancta.) In the beginning, it was without exception. See Exod. 19:13 (the infected must not even be touched for killing!); Lev. 10; 1Sam. 6; 2Sam 6. [He can be criticized for his dating of sources.]

4.5. Further comments on Lev. 6:11 [English 18]

Milgrom translates:

Whatever touches them shall become holy.

He comments:

The plural suffix cannot claim as its antecedent the cereal offering, which is found only in the singular throughout this pericope. The antecedent cannot be anything else than *’iššê* ‘food gifts of’, a plural noun that refers not only to the cereal offering, but also to the purification and reparation offerings mentioned in the verse.

This matters for translation, but is not discussed in the *Handbook*. But note GNTD:

Anyone else who touches a food offering will be harmed by the power of its holiness.

Milgrom remarks (396) that the meat of the *peace offering* is not “most holy” and is not in view here.

Handbook:

Whoever: the Hebrew word thus translated may also mean “whatever” (compare verse 27) and is so translated in NIV. Possibly both human beings and nonhumans were intended by the writer. In any case, the male members of the priestly family are not included since they were specifically given permission to eat. For this reason it may be better to translate “Anyone else...” as in TEV or “anyone who is not a priest.” In some languages a contrastive conjunction like “but” may also be required.

Shall become holy: this verse highlights the fact that the word frequently translated holy does not have as its primary meaning the ethical and moral connotations often attributed to it. The central meaning has to do with being “set aside for a particular purpose” or “withheld (or, excluded) from ordinary use.” In other contexts this implies being consecrated to God. But here it has more the idea of being unfit for ordinary human use. The meaning approaches that of “taboo” in some cultures. AT and MFT, in fact, translate here “shall be(come) taboo.” TEV seeks to render this same idea more dynamically with “will be harmed by the power of its holiness.” Another modern version translates “will experience unfortunate consequences.” Care should be taken in this context not to translate in such a way as to give the impression that anyone or anything touching a food offering would suddenly change in moral character or receive any other positive benefit. What happens here is clearly negative. Some writers even suggest that the real meaning is that any person other than the male descendants of Aaron who touch the offering must die. Some other ways of rendering this idea are “will suffer from his act,” or “will find misfortune,” or “will experience dire consequences.” The term used for **holy** will certainly need to be explained in detail in the glossary.

4.6. Commentaries on Lev. 6:17-21 [English 24-28]

Sklar favors “must be holy” (i.e., be a priest) over “will become holy”, because the context is about “the holiness necessary for those handling and eating the sacred gifts”. (One could argue, though, that a statement about what happens to unauthorized people is also not out of place.)

4.7. Commentaries on Hagg. 2:10-13

The robe becomes holy, but it does not itself transmit holiness.

Handbook on v. 12:

Any robe used in this way to carry consecrated meat itself became holy (Lev 6.24-28). ...

The main point of the question was whether the robe could then pass on holiness to any other items of food it touched. This is expressed very clearly in TEV: “If he then lets his robe touch any bread, cooked food, wine, olive oil, or any kind of food at all, will it make that food consecrated also?”

Elliger (ATD, 1950):

Die Priester stellen fest, “daß unter bestimmtem Gesichtswinkel dem Heiligen keine heiligende Kraft, wohl aber dem Unreinen verunreinigende Kraft innewohnt”.

Wolff (BKAT, 1986) (P. 70):

Die indirekte Berührung mit dem Heiligen macht das Profane nicht heilig.

Motyer (McComiskey, ed., 1998):

Holiness is not contagious. Uncleaness is contagious.

(Further commentaries on Haggai should be consulted.)

4.8. Commentaries on Ezek. 44:19

Unexplicably, some commentators do not give any explanation at all. Those who do fall into two categories: (1.) Keil thinks the main concern is keeping the holy apart from the common, and that the people cannot keep up the necessary status of purity. (2.) The *Handbook* explains that holiness is fatal for the common people, and they need to be protected. Others put varying emphasis on these two aspects. Block’s explanation is the most comprehensive.

Keil (314f.)

The meaning is simply that they are not to move among the people in the outer court while wearing their official clothes, that they may not sanctify them by their holy clothes. This sanctification cannot be understood in any other way than as analogous to the rule laid down in the law, that touching most holy sacrificial flesh would sanctify (Lev. vi. 11, 20), which Ezekiel repeats in ch. xlvi. 20, and which does not stand in anything like an isolated position in the law, but is also affirmed in Ex. xxix. 37 and xxx. 29 of the altar of burnt-offering and the vessels of the sanctuary. The same thing which applied to these vessels—namely, that their holiness passed from them to any one who touched them—is here predicated of the holy dresses of the priests; and the moving of the priests among the people in their holy clothes is forbidden, because such holiness, acquired by contact with holy objects, imposed upon the person to whom it had passed the obligation to guard against all defilement (Lev. xxi. 1-8), which the people could not avoid in the ordinary relations of life, and thus a weakening or abolition of the distinction between things holy and common would inevitably have ensued.

Taylor:

... to avoid any suspicion of contagion between what was holy and what was common.

Zimmerli, strangely, does not comment.

Allen:

Holiness is here regarded as a dangerous, contagious element from which nonpriestly mortals needed to be protected.

Block (640f.):

There is no need for Ezekiel to elaborate on the contagion of holiness because the idea was commonly accepted. Just as communicable diseases are spread by germs or viruses, so holiness may attach itself to a person. While the people were charged to live ethically holy lives, contact [p 641] with holy objects was a strict taboo.¹³⁶ In extending this ordinance to priestly garments Ezekiel adopts a stricter stance than the Mosaic Torah, which, in warning about the contagion of holiness, prohibits lay contact with the sanctuary, its furnishings and objects, but avoids any reference to the priest's clothing.¹³⁷ While Ezekiel was undoubtedly aware of the lethal consequences of holy contagion, his present concern is not the potential victims but protecting the sanctity of the sanctuary.

¹³⁶ The lethal effects of such contact are explicitly declared in Num. 4:15 and illustrated in 1 Sam. 6:19 (more than 50,000 men of Beth-shemesh were struck down because some had looked inside the ark of the covenant) and 2 Sam. 6:6–9 (Uzzah was struck dead for touching the ark, despite his noble intention of protecting it). On the contagion of holiness see Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, pp. 175–77; Milgrom, *Leviticus*, pp. 443–56.

¹³⁷ See Exod. 29:37; 30:26–30. According to Milgrom (*Leviticus*, p. 447) the placement of “Whatever touches them will become holy” at the end of v. 29 intentionally excludes the priests (and their garments) from the taboo.

Maier translates: “..., damit sie das Volk nicht durch ihre Kleider mit dem Heiligen in Berührung bringen.” and comments only “..., was eben nicht sein soll”. Thus, he only alludes to the strict separation between holy and common.

Duguid:

..., so that holiness might not be accidentally transmitted to the people. In Israelite law, holiness was not dangerous by itself. It was dangerous only to one who was contaminated with impurity or who acted in contravention of its laws [Footnote: Milgrom, *Leviticus* 1–16, 978–85]. Therefore the priest, who daily handled the holy things, had to take special care with regard to his ritual cleanliness and actions.

(He then points to Nadab and Abihu, and continues to show how the next verses address the same issue: danger through contamination. He does not explain how this affects the people.)

Thompson (255):

In 44:17–31 various regulations follow to minimize priestly defilement ... This clothing would be taken off and left in the sacred changing rooms so as to protect others from having holiness transmitted to them through it.

Handbook:

Lest they communicate holiness to the people with their garments: This clause refers to the belief in the Old Testament that holiness was contagious and could attach itself to people and things if they simply touched something that was holy. If this happened to the wrong people, they would die immediately, as was the case when Uzzah touched the Covenant Box in 2 Sam 6.6–8 (compare the footnote in GNT). A model for this clause and the previous one is “They must put on other clothes [or, their normal clothes], so that people won’t touch their sacred clothes and die because they [or, people] were not allowed to touch anything sacred.”

Kilchör (*Wiederhergestellter Gottesdienst* [Freiburg: Herder, 2020], 278):

Ez 44,17-19 knüpft für die Beschreibung der Priesterkleidung aber gerade an Lev 16 an und nicht an die allgemeine Priesterkleidung.

Sowohl in P wie auch in Ez 40–48 kann die Heiligkeit auf Personen übertragen werden.

The holy clothes have to remain in the holy area – in Ezek. 44:19 just as in Lev. 16:23. [cf. Kilchör 136] – whether this is for the sake of the holy objects, or for the sake of the people, is debated.

Num. 17:1-5 should also be taken into regard. [See Kilchör 277, footnote, referring to Haran.]

4.9. Conclusion and Translation

Impurity is contagious; holiness is dangerous.

I lean toward Milgrom’s translation “Whatever touches X shall become holy.” – without accepting all his theories.

With Wenham, I wonder whether it is really death that would occur to an unauthorized person who touches something (most?) holy, or whether there were any means of de-consecrating him ritually.

In any event, translations would have to convey that “become holy” is something negative. The *Handbooks* on Lev. 6:11 [English 18] and Ezk. 44:16; 46:20 give some quite good explanations. They recommend wordings like for example “will suffer from his act,” (Lev.), or “so that people won’t die” (Ezek. 44:16), or “so that they won’t risk harming the people” (Ezek. 46:20). But as long as we do not fully understand the dynamics, it might be better to use vaguer wordings rather than speaking explicitly of death.

I more or less follow Block’s view on Ezek. 44:19.

Once one agrees on following the interpretation “Whatever touches X will become holy”, the challenge remains to clarify what that means. There is some uncertainty about it, and it could be that the consequences of “becoming holy” depend on whether persons or objects are talked about. Therefore, a vague rendering might be the best solution. The examples below represent some of the ways how the versions have tried to deal with the consequential clause, more or less successfully.

Exod. 29:37:

- ESVUS16 Whatever touches the altar shall become holy.
- GNTD Anyone or anything that touches it will be harmed by the power of its holiness.
- GCLNR00 Jeder Unbefugte, der ihn berührt, muss sterben.
(= Every unauthorized [person] who touches it, shall die.)
- Luther84NR06 Wer den Altar anrührt, der ist dem Heiligtum verfallen.
(= Whoever touches the altar, will be forfeited/bound to the sanctuary.)
- REB89 Whoever touches the altar must be treated as holy.
- T4T Anyone or anything that touches the altar will become taboo.
- FC97 toute personne ou tout objet qui entrerait en contact avec lui subirait des conséquences fâcheuses.
(= Every person or every object that gets in contact with it will undergo unpleasant/painful consequences.)
- PDV2017 Toute personne ou tout objet qui le touchera en supportera les conséquences.
(= Every person or every object that touches it will bear the consequences.)

Lev. 6:11[18]:

- NASB Whoever touches them will become consecrated.
- Luther84NR06 Wer sie anrührt, soll dem Heiligtum gehören.
(= Whoever touches them shall belong to the sanctuary.)³
- T4T Anyone else who touches those offerings made from grain will be punished by God.
- PDV2017 Toutes les autres personnes qui toucheront à cette part supporteront des conséquences graves.
(= All the other persons who touch this portion will bear severe consequences.)

For Exod. 29:37, GCLNR00 seems right with its threat of death penalty.

For Lev. 6:11[18], Luther84NR06 recommends itself: (a) By mentioning the sanctuary, it manages to keep an equivalent for the root *qdš* ‘holy’; (b) it expresses some negative consequence; (c) it does so without either specifying that God will execute judgment or what people have to do; and (d) it hints at the possibility that what belongs to the sanctuary is put to use.

4.10. Study Note

Unless one wants to explicate the text, as suggested by the *Handbook* on Ezek. 44:19 (see above), a minimal explanation in a footnote seems necessary. The NIV Study Bible from 2002 only says: “In the interest of ritual purity.” That is not enough.

Suggestion to be worked on.

4.11. Further questions / Residue

- What are the negative effects on the holy thing that is touched?
- Verb: who touches what?
- Impure persons and objects transmit their impurity to other persons and objects. What about holiness? Holiness, too, is transmitted. But what are the effects? The dynamics might be like this:
 - When holy + pure come in contact, the clean thing is sanctified (whatever that means in consequence).
 - When holy + impure come in contact, the holy thing is polluted.
- Deut. 22:9 (NASB): “You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, or all the produce of the seed which you have sown and the increase of the vineyard will become defiled [שִׁדָּן *Qal?!.*].”
- Question regarding Hartley: Is “everyone who” not normally expressed differently?? E.g. Lev. 15:10 2x.
- What are likely cases in real life: Who/what touches who/what?
- The LXX has “everyone who” (not: “whatever”) in the four main places (Exod. 29:37; 30:29; Lev. 6:11 [English18]; Lev. 6:20 [English 27]).

4.12. Further reading

Milgrom (AB, 2001) (pp. 2413f.)

Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, pp. 175–77 (referred to by Block, Ezekiel)

Kilchör, Benjamin. *Wiederhergestellter Gottesdienst: Eine Deutung Der Zweiten Tempelvision Ezechiels (Ez 40–48)*.... Freiburg: Herder, 2020. Especially “Exkurs 2: Zur Übertragbarkeit des Heiligen”, pp. 275-279.

³ Note that Luther2017 changed this to “Was damit in Berührung kommt, wird heilig.” (= Whatever gets in touch with it, will become holy.)