Holiness

God’s Presence

In the Latter Prophets

Yahweh’s budding family, Israel, has crashed about in the Promised Land for centuries, trying out the freedom to exercise its divinely granted powers. They have fought hard for settlement and have been successful; then divided (Judah and Ephraim) and defeated and scattered under the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. Always given second chances by Yahweh in order that they actualize the divine plan; they rarely pause to consider the gravity of their actions.

Through the Latter Prophets, God raises the divine volume to a new level, wailing that the rebellious chosen continue to displease, and not just with their actions. Israel’s misconceptions have now led to *ideas* and *feelings* that are not only corrupt; they are deeply offensive to the very existence of Yahweh. Israel is in denial of the reality of God’s presence. And it is unacceptable to God.

On the verge of departing the sin polluted environment once and for all, the Holy One of Israel[[1]](#footnote-1) will elect to continue to judge, refine, and bless the chosen with salvation[[2]](#footnote-2) purely in order to sanctify the holy name.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the Latter Prophets we appropriately find not as much narrative[[4]](#footnote-4) as was presented in the Deuteronomistic History. But oracles muttered by prophets in poetry and prose speeches serve well, particularly when read out loud or heard in song, as performative[[5]](#footnote-5) of the *ideas* and *feelings* that would correspond to a circumcised heart.[[6]](#footnote-6) This form of communication reflects and attempts to mold a slightly more mature audience, no longer to be given the same grace one would give a child or teenager; an audience with experience and few or no innocent excuses for its mistakes, one who has developed a stone heart,[[7]](#footnote-7) which Yahweh will redeem in order to display holiness.

Within the scope of this paper it isn’t possible to catalogue all of the human misconceptions highlighted by the Later Prophets. A few significant examples will be explored in order to demonstrate how *the delusion of Israel is steeped in concern for the insubstantial and, conversely, how the quintessential presence of Yahweh (holiness) is made substantial by the very absence of its acknowledgement by Israel.* These texts are not “morality lessons” to be made into disconnected law by the head but truths to be absorbed by the heart, promising to actually change the Scripture reader’s disposition as they listen to God’s voice. [[8]](#footnote-8)

**Where is God? (God’s Holy Presence)**

The first example of a misconception that the Israelites are living under is that they can determine when and where Yahweh is present.

God had promised to “dwell among the Israelites”[[9]](#footnote-9) in the consecrated tabernacle. And the people of the Exodus *saw* the pillar of cloud that would descend when Moses entered the tent. Moses was the last prophet to speak to the Lord face to face.[[10]](#footnote-10) The very next thing that happens when Moses asks Yahweh to demonstrate that Israel is distinct by showing divine glory is that Yahweh’s face *becomes hidden* from Moses,[[11]](#footnote-11) Yahweh presents the mysterious divine name and nature,[[12]](#footnote-12) and the covenant is re-established in the rewriting of the commandments in stone. A concrete response is required: the building of the tabernacle and keeping of a strict and specific holiness code.[[13]](#footnote-13) But Yahweh does not dwell with Israel because the tabernacle exists, rather because God determines to do so.

At first, it seems very exciting and wonderful to be Yahweh’s chosen and be encouraged to “sanctify yourselves…and be holy, for I am holy.”[[14]](#footnote-14) But the enormity of being the Lord’s chosen has come with grave responsibilities.[[15]](#footnote-15) It soon becomes clear (well documented in Deuteronomistic History) that it is impossible for humans in general and Israel in particular to hold to the concrete level of moral and physical perfection that represents holiness.

Once their vision for fulfillment of the covenant fails to materialize and Israel is overtaken by earthly superpowers, how do they think and feel about their situation? They apparently no longer believe Yahweh is present.[[16]](#footnote-16) Rituals and worship seem rote and farcical.[[17]](#footnote-17) Self-sufficiency and self-reassurance is required, causing cruel oppression and chaotic leadership. [[18]](#footnote-18) They horde resources by cheating and oppressing the weak.[[19]](#footnote-19) They are blinded by idol worship[[20]](#footnote-20) (possibly only for the sake of domestic peace). They listen to false prophets.[[21]](#footnote-21) Only people who are deeply afraid that God has left them would bother to act in this empty and desperate way.

It is significant that the failure of Israel to adhere to its mission of light (instead spreading sin and injustice) is pinned in the Latter Prophets to a specific time and place, originating with a prophet who can be a historical person (First Isaiah, Judah approx 742-701BCE), but also designated as having a divine origin (“thus said the Lord”)[[22]](#footnote-22).

It is Yahweh’s voice we hear bemoaning a concrete historical situation and it is only within Yahweh’s power and purview to invite repentance and redeem the situation.[[23]](#footnote-23) Yahweh is clearly still present. And the Lord is clearly still holy.[[24]](#footnote-24) And there is hope for Zion to still be holy, but it is because of the Lord’s actions, not Israel’s.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The performative effect of reading Isaiah 1-6 makes Yahweh’s ongoing presence *felt*: for example when the vineyard of the Lord is to be judged guilty- not the Lord, we clearly see the Lord. And Yahweh’s presence is holy because it is exalted by justice and righteousness; Israel is warned that they are afraid of the wrong thing, they should be afraid of this (very present) God’s judgment. [[26]](#footnote-26) The very failure of Israel to acknowledge Yahweh’s strong presence (in the text) seems incongruous with the reality of Israel’s sinful state (as presented by the text) and accents Yahweh’s holy beneficence in intending to set things right. When hearing this, the circumcised heart blanches for Israel.

**Shame (God’s Justice and Mercy)**

The second example of a misconception that the Israelites are living under is that they are somehow going to get away with bad behavior.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The Holiness Code of Leviticus has specified what is required of Yahweh’s people in order that they be useful to their assignment (set aside) as Yahweh’s light to the nations. Whether oppressed by Assyria (First Isaiah’s time) or scattered by Babylon (Ezekiel) or liberated by Persia (Malachi) the voice of the prophets make it clear Israel is not in compliance; not in good times or bad. They are spreading sin not light. But are they humbled by their own failure in a way that recognizes God’s justice and mercy? No. And their flagrant arrogance serves to accentuate God’s holy attributes.

In spite of current “everyone should feel good all the time” attitudes of modern culture, the text teaches us that shame is an appropriate response when we have done something shameful, or evil, in the eyes of the Lord. But also God doesn’t leave us there; we can experience the feeling of being healed when we absorb the words in the text that reassure us of God’s mercy.

For example, in Ezekiel which is arranged around the 587BCE fall of Jerusalem we find vivid language that evokes strong feelings. The New Oxford Annotated Bible notes that Ezekiel’s strange modes of presentation could be due to the disorienting experience of exile in Babylon,[[28]](#footnote-28) which I would purport is exactly the point- the way things are stated in the Latter Prophets in general and Ezekiel in particular gives the reader the appropriate emotional experience for the message, which helps us know God. We are first put in awe of God’s incomprehensible presence (Ezekiel 1-3) and the frightening commission of the prophet which is both truly scary (do not fear but you might be killed)[[29]](#footnote-29) and impossible (they will not listen).[[30]](#footnote-30) The reader can feel the prophet’s side and also the frustration of Yahweh; caused by Israel’s “hard forehead” and “stubborn heart” which are indicative not just of Israel’s behavior but of their thinking and feeling. But Yahweh (whose voice is firmly established)[[31]](#footnote-31) is reassuring and the divine intentions are clearly for the head *and* the heart– “all my words that I shall speak to you, receive in your heart and with your ears.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Ezekiel is then directed to do a number of bizarre and seemingly embarrassing things. I can feel a blush on my face at the thought of performing these abhorrent activities (please God, don’t ask *me* to do this kind of stuff).[[33]](#footnote-33) The reader can *feel* what it means to be made a mockery of by Yahweh, and thus also the depth of Yahweh’s anger.[[34]](#footnote-34)

By the time the text reaches chapter 16, the reader has experienced a full catalogue of Israel’s crimes and Yahweh’s intended punishment[[35]](#footnote-35) in the destruction of Jerusalem. The supposed “house of the Lord” is now so filthy the Lord is forced to withdraw from it.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Ezekiel 16 uses a story that makes the reader (or worse, hearer in a group) squeamish. It is raw in its descriptions which I would say *intentionally* are crafted to embarrass us. Intimacy is used to ultimately provoke shame. This is done through the allegory of an abandoned baby who, rescued, grows into first a desirable young woman treated like royalty and then evolves into a brazen insatiable whore- sick at heart[[37]](#footnote-37)- because the whoredom was motivated by lust, not survival or love. Yahweh answers this blatantly scornful attitude with the shame of lewd nakedness. The passages go on and on until the reader wants to say “Stop it!”[[38]](#footnote-38) The shame that should be felt by Israel at its betrayal of Yahweh cannot be avoided by the reader if this text is given a heart-felt reading. The haughty are meant to be disgraced and ashamed.[[39]](#footnote-39) This is followed by great relief in verse 62, “I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the Lord.”

After the ruthless descriptions of sin, judgment, and punishment the reader can be greatly relieved by the breath of fresh air provided in passages such as Ezek. 34:11-16, where Yahweh cares for the chosen flock with tenderness. However, there is no mistaking that God does this according to the divine plan and not according to retribution for repentance. The dry bones of Ezek. 37 are completely beyond being able to take any action for their own sake, notice it is their “hope” that perished – it was their inappropriate attitude (something made up of thoughts and feelings) that has brought them to this valley and only the Lord’s spirit (breath) can change them into something that again has life and breath. This vivid illustration leaves no doubt that life is Yahweh’s purview and also Yahweh’s intention; and God’s mysterious ways[[40]](#footnote-40) make it possible for Israel to once again be holy.[[41]](#footnote-41) And in doing these things in contrast to Israel’s shame, Yahweh’s justice and mercy are made unmistakably clear,[[42]](#footnote-42) as is the feeling of relief we have that Yahweh’s intention is to dwell once again with the chosen people,[[43]](#footnote-43) a comforting thought.

**Because God Says So (God’s trustworthiness and faithfulness)**

Jonah and Malachi bookend the Latter Prophets on the historical timeline but both point out similar attributes of God by showcasing the rebellion of God’s designated servants (prophets and priests) during times of favored status and complacency. Other prophets like Amos and Hosea are busy warning Israel during this time that the chosen are not exempt from judgment on the “Day of the Lord.” The cushy times make this hard to believe, but we know from historical events that those times all eventually end.

The misconception that sets off God’s trustworthiness and faithfulness to Israel in this last example is the idea that “God is asking me to do something that doesn’t make sense.” What will be highlighted by this bad attitude is Yahweh’s trustworthiness and faithfulness to Yahweh’s overarching historical intentions.

Jonah is called to prophecy in Nineveh[[44]](#footnote-44) about Yahweh’s impending judgment of that population. From where Jonah stands (with Nineveh as Israel’s enemy and God as their potential salvation); what Yahweh has instructed the prophet to do is so unconscionable that it prompts him to attempt to run away. Whether this is a statement to God of Jonah’s opinion (“God, that doesn’t make sense.”) or Jonah actually invites to be killed (or maybe forgiven?) by God in retribution for his cowardly reaction, God proves to Jonah that humans cannot override God’s plans, Yahweh will determine the outcome.[[45]](#footnote-45) But note that the concern of God in this story is not for Jonah’s actions but for his reactive *feelings*, Jonah’s unjustified anger. Yahweh responds to Jonah’s unreasonable stance with Yahweh’s own unreasonable concern in the divine plan for every human and animal in Nineveh.[[46]](#footnote-46) The lack of an explanation for Yahweh’s actions and plans serves to emphasize for the reader that God will do what God will do and Israel needs to trust (and can’t predict)[[47]](#footnote-47) this, after all, Yahweh has stood by this pouting prophet even when he was angry at his assignment (and God) and wanted to die. The reader is frustrated at God’s mysterious ways, a feeling that helps us know that we can’t see the big picture from God’s perspective.

Yahweh challenges Israel more directly in Malachi. “Put me to the test.”[[48]](#footnote-48) But this is not an opening to question God or God’s love for Israel.[[49]](#footnote-49) It is a challenge to circumscribe the heart (“…lay it to heart to give glory to my name…”)[[50]](#footnote-50) Yahweh is asking for the respect that is due and hasn’t arrived.[[51]](#footnote-51) The reverence and awe of Levi are what is called for;[[52]](#footnote-52) it is not the actions but the *attitude* of the sacrifices that has offended God. The attitude has shifted from just the indifference of sloppy worship to “why should we when Yahweh isn’t doing what we want?”[[53]](#footnote-53)

The priests have been faithless and profaned the sanctuary with a marriage to foreign gods.[[54]](#footnote-54) An indication that their *hearts* have left the Lord. But the refiner’s fire is promised, the Day of the Lord.[[55]](#footnote-55) And how should Israel feel? They should be afraid because they are already cursed for robbing God.[[56]](#footnote-56) The test is not in doing evil and getting away with it;[[57]](#footnote-57) it is in bringing in the full tithe (with a committed heart) so that God can bless.

The abundant promise of 3:10 is amazing (overflowing blessing) in the face of the priest’s appalling behavior (what an antithesis to “robbery”). Those who have the right attitude- “revered the Lord and thought on his name”- will be remembered on the Day of the Lord.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The words of the prophet conclude by affirming that “remembering the teaching” is the command but it is the Lord (through the words of the prophets) that will turn *hearts* and prevent the curse.[[59]](#footnote-59) Yahweh shows no hesitation in making faithful promises and in showing confidence that all will come true.[[60]](#footnote-60) All whining, questions, and protests are rebuked; the Lord will not accept an offering of those with the wrong attitude.[[61]](#footnote-61) The reader is left with no doubt that the Day of the Lord is coming; the arrogant and evildoers will face the refiner’s fire.[[62]](#footnote-62)

**Conclusion**

In the end holiness can’t be found by trying to look God in the face (after Moses, the prophets barely get to see the hem of Yahweh’s robe or gleam of the divine aura)[[63]](#footnote-63), we have to find another angle. The essence of God’s holiness can be found by observing how human conceptions about justice, truthfulness, mercy, and faithfulness can’t work alone to produce salvation. We need God’s holiness to purify us. The full definition of God’s holy attributes is beyond us, the creature can’t define the Creator except through what it experiences in the creation.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Beyond what is presented in this paper there are numerous other examples in the Latter Prophets of misconceptions on the part of the people of Israel (that are also relevant to our current day) which are just as reveling of God’s essence, for example: “The right human leader will save us,” “Military power will protect us,” “God doesn’t know my worship is shoddy,” “My position in society means something to God and others,” “It’s MY money (time, stuff, etc),” “God’s glory is in the past,” “I seem to be getting away with this,” “I should just tell them what they want to hear” “I’m exempt because of a, or b, or c,” “God doesn’t listen.”

We learn from the Latter Prophets that God doesn’t live in the same dimensions we do. God’s holiness transcends time, space, and the concept of person. God is here now, on the Day of YHWH, and over time in history. God cannot be solely contained or enslaved in a tabernacle or temple or community but only dwells where God chooses.[[65]](#footnote-65) God knew us in the womb,[[66]](#footnote-66) infuses us with divine Spirit,[[67]](#footnote-67) and will restore us when we are lost or even dead.[[68]](#footnote-68) And all by free divine choice; a pure act of Yahweh’s love for Israel. What does God seem to want us to acknowledge?

“I am your God, and you are my people.”

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1. To use Isaiah’s designation for Yahweh. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although the Latter Prophets also address foreign nations, this paper will be contained in scope to Yahweh’s communication with Israel. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1967), 90-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ezek 36:16-32. (All Scripture references in this paper are from the NRSV.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jonah and brief stories about the prophet’s activities are the exceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Language “effecting” that to which it refers. John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1994), 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lev 26:40-42, Deut 10:12-16, and Jer 31:33 describe Yahweh’s intentions/requirements for circumcision of the heart [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ezek 36:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jer 31:33-34 “This is a covenant that I will make with the house of Israel…I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me…” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Exod. 29:43-46 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Exod. 33:9-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Exod. 33:16-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Exod. 34:5-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lev. 17-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lev. 11:44 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. J. H. Eaton. *Mysterious Messengers* (Eerdmans, 1998), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Isaiah 1:3, 3:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Isaiah 1:10-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Isaiah 3:5-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Isaiah 1:21-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Isaiah 2:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Isaiah 2:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. An “authorizing formula” for a message during OT times. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (London:Lutterworth Press, 1967), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Isaiah 1:18-19, 1:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Isaiah 6:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Isaiah 4:2-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Isaiah 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ezek. 8:12 “…For they say, ‘The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land’.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E Murphy, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* NRSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), OT 1057. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ezek. 2:6, plus the death threat of 3:16-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ezek 3:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ezek. 3:11 Leaves no doubt by using the distinct “Messenger Formula” to establish authority. Westermann, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ezek. 3:10, also 10:19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ezek 4-5, Ezekiel is asked to lie around a plate to show the siege, eat unclean bread as Israel’s representative, create litter from shorn hair, proclaim intergenerational cannibalism, etc [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ezek. 5:13-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ezek. 9:4-5 even reminiscent of the horror of the angel of death in Egypt [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ezek. 10:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ezek. 16:30 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. I even feel uncomfortable writing about it. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ezek. 16:50-52 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ezek 37:14 “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live…” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ezek 37:23 “I will save them…cleanse them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ezek. 39:26-29 “They shall forget their shame…through them (I) have displayed my holiness…they shall know that I am the Lord…and I will never again hide my face from them when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel.” [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. In a temple that respects the Lord’s exact specifications to serve the Lord’s needs, Ezek. 40-48, in a city named “The Lord is There.”(48:35). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Capital of Assyria, Israel’s enemy and oppressor. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Jonah 1:4 god causes the wind at sea, 1:17 God sends the fish, 3:10 God changes plans for Nineveh, 4:6 God appoints the shady bush, 4:7 God appoints the bush worm, 4:7 God is concerned for whom God is concerned (also see Exodus 33:19 “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Jonah 4:10-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Jonah’s fish could just as well have been what every sailor of that time would have been most afraid of: a monstrous sea-serpent that would eat him instead of what Yahweh used the fish for- Jonah’s salvation. We see here a possible example of God using the thing that we are the most afraid of to save us. This is a footnote because it doesn’t *say* in the text that Jonah was afraid of the fish- so I am recognizing my assumptive speculation by placing my comment here. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Mal 3:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Mal 1:2 clearly rebukes Israel for asking the question “How have you loved us?” [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Mal 2:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Mal 1:6-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Mal 2:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Mal 2:13-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Mal 2:10-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Mal 3:1-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Mal 3:5-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Mal 3:15, 18; 4:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Mal 3:16-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Mal 4:4-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Mal 4:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Mal 1:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Mal 4:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Isaiah 6:1, Ezek. 1:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ezek. 38:14-23 for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Isaiah 66:1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Jer. 1:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ezek. 2:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ezek 37:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)