

Consecrate (oneself) – Notes; usable, but expandable. PS. 2025

קדש is one of the roots where the various Hebrew conjugations are used in different ways, and quite typically so.

qal – be holy

piel – sanctify/consecrate (things, people, times)

hiphil – treat as holy (e.g., God's name)

hitpael – consecrate oneself

[First, consider how someone can consecrate others (Moses, Samuel).]

Here, I am mostly concerned with the last one, the reflexive *hitpael*.

It occurs over 20 times, with a concentration in 2Chr., where it is used especially with regard to the priests. In Isa. 66:17, we find it in the context of pagan rituals. (2Sam. 11:4 is a special case, and Ezek. 38:23 shows a different usage too.)

There are some more aspects that would be of interest to comment on, but my main question is:

What does “consecrate yourselves” mean? What were the people supposed to do? And how can that be conveyed in a translation?

Let us look at the few occurrences in the Pentateuch.

The first occurrence of the *hitpael* is also the most instructive one. We find it in Exod. 19, where the Israelites have arrived at Mt. Sinai and the LORD prepares them for his revelation and for the making of the covenant.

Verses 10 and 14–15 and 22–23 read (NASB):

The Lord also said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them [piel] today and tomorrow, and have them wash their garments. ...

So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated [piel] the people, and they washed their garments. He also said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

Also have the priests who approach the Lord consecrate themselves [hitpael], or else the Lord will break out against them.” And Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set boundaries around the mountain and consecrate it [piel].’”

HCOT:

2:450 (on v. 10): “Moses must prepare Israel for the encounter with the Holy One; he must see to it that they consecrate themselves; that is done by removing impurity and staying away from defilement; both requirements are enlarged upon at one concrete point: the clothes must be washed [*footnote: According to rabbinic exegesis, the requirement that the body be washed is implied as well. ...*]; sexual intercourse is taboo [*footnote: ... here evidently it [the taboo] is pars pro toto of all sources of defilement.*].”

2:458 (on v. 22 and the priests): “... ‘to consecrate oneself’ means here, according to the context, ‘to keep distance’. ... Unlikely ... is that the text means to say that the priests must do more to prepare themselves than at other times, must reach a greater degree of holiness.”

In the above text, the people anticipate witnessing God appearing on Sinai. In the text below, they have to get ready for receiving meat – which is an ambivalent miracle, because it entails a judgment.

Num. 11:18 says (NASB):

Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the Lord.

The temporal phrase “for tomorrow” indicates some preparation – like even more explicitly above (“Be ready for the third day”).

JPSTC on Num.:

That is, “sanctify yourselves” by a rite of laundering and bathing that precedes a sacrifice.

Milgrom stresses the time lapse required.

In Excursus 27 (“Sanctification: Preparation for Theophany”, pp. 384–386), he says:

Whereever laundering is commanded so is ritual bathing (Num. 19:19; cf. Lev. 15:5–11, 21–22, 27).

He further points to Gen. 35:2ff. [showing the *hitpael* of טָהַר, ‘purify yourselves’], in preparation to coming to Bethel.

Already in Leviticus, it becomes clear that holiness is a lifestyle.

In Lev. 11:44, we read (NASB):

Consecrate yourselves [hitpael] therefore, and be holy [adj.], because I am holy [adj.]. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth.

Compare Lev. 20:7, preceded by the command to stay away from occult practices.

AYB:

Israel must not contaminate itself by ingesting land swarmers because holiness, the goal it must seek, cannot coexist with impurity.

ZECOT:

Note the mixing of the ritual and moral realms at this point. ... “Just as you must not defile yourselves by anything you eat, so you must not defile yourselves by anything you do.”

Summary

- Consecrating oneself is demanded in preparation of meeting God in a theophany or a miracle or a sacrifice (e.g. 1Sam. 16:5).
- It is about removing impurity; this happens through the washing of the clothes, the washing of the body;
- ... and about avoiding new defilement; this requires the abstinence from sexual intercourse, and any other defilement, like from eating unclean animals.
- It includes a period of waiting.
- Note that fasting is not required, nor is abstinence from alcohol mentioned in particular.

Translation

- Translators probably have to choose between a vague *consecrate yourselves*, which the readers will fill with their own ideas (unless they are informed by Exod. 19:10–15), and a more concrete “wash yourselves and do not have sex”, which is too long and explicit to be repeated, and still does not include everything involved.
- Using the verb *purify* is a less than ideal wording, because in some places, that Hebrew verb occurs next to the *hitpael* of טָהַר, and purification is only one aspect of consecrating oneself – although it might be the most obvious one.
- In some of the references, the Hebrew text itself brings out the aspect of “preparing”. One could consider explicating this also in some other places. Cf. NCV, which in 2Chr. 29:5 has “Make yourselves ready for ...”.
- Since this is an unfamiliar concept, a glossary entry might be in order.