

The Third Commandment and the Divine Name

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What is the significance and meaning of the Divine Name of God in light of the Third Commandment?

When Christians today think about “the name of God,” a wide variety of possible meanings are often applied that may or may not have any root in the Scriptures.¹ When your average Christian typically thinks of God’s “name,” what he or she is actually thinking about are titles for the Supreme Deity, namely the terms “God” and “Lord.” While these titles are certainly important to respect in our conversations and reflections on the Almighty, they ultimately only describe who He is. When we see the topic of God’s name addressed by the authors of the Old Testament, we see a slightly different perspective. The name of the Lord is something that they look to for specific theological and etymological significance. As Isaiah 26:8 explains it, “In the path of thy judgments, O LORD, we wait for thee; thy memorial name is the desire of our soul” (RSV).

The challenge that we face today as emerging pastors, Bible teachers, and possibly even theologians, is to convey a strong sense of reverence and respect that the ancient Hebrews had for the name of God, that is evidenced throughout the Old Testament. No better statement summarizes the significance of God’s name than the Third Commandment. As it appears in most English Bibles, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Exodus 20:7; cf. Deuteronomy 5:11). Most Christian interpreters will apply these verses as meaning that the English terms “God,” “Lord,” and “Jesus Christ” should not be used as blasphemous slurs or in a dishonorable way. Jack S. Deere summarizes this interpretation well, observing, “This command forbids using God’s name in profanity but it includes more. The third commandment is a directive against using God’s name in a manipulative way (e.g., His name is not to be used in magic or to curse someone). Today a Christian who uses God’s name flippantly or falsely attributes a wrong act to God has broken this commandment.”² It is doubtful that any of us would find a sincere believer who would disagree with these views.

There is, however, more to consider regarding the Third Commandment. The NJPS Tanakh, a Jewish Bible version, renders Exodus 20:7 in a somewhat different way than in our Christian versions: “You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.” The NJPS translators have decided to extrapolate that the Hebrew phrase *l’shav* (לְשׂוּא) relates to one swearing falsely in God’s name, rather than using His name in vain. The *HALOT* lexicon indicates that *shav* has a variety of possible meanings, including “lie, deception, triviality, with different spellings שׁוּ, שׂוּ, שׂוּא,” further indicating that in Psalm 12:3, 41:7, and 144:8,1, the phrase *nasa shem l’shav* (נָסָא שֵׁם לְשׂוּא) could be used “to utter a name in vain, unnecessarily to abuse a name in an evil way (in a magic ritual or in an oath).”³ One could possibly assume that the reference to oath taking is a reflection on a Jewish interpretation of the Third Commandment. Indeed, this is confirmed by Nahum Sarna

¹ This paper was originally written for the editor’s Introduction to the Old Testament class at Asbury Theological Seminary (Fall 2006).

² Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 272.

³ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 2:1425.

who comments, "The ambiguities allow for the proscription of perjury by the principals of a lawsuit, swearing falsely, and the unnecessary frivolous use of the divine Name."⁴

While it is important to consider these valuable opinions of the Third Commandment, as they give us a framework of the views present in both Christianity and Judaism, how are we to consider what the Third Commandment itself tells us? When we look at the Hebrew behind our English translations, the Third Commandment really does not tell us to "not misuse the name of the LORD your God" (Exodus 20:7, NIV), but rather to "not misuse the name of YHWH your God." This is because the Hebrew name יהוה, often represented in English as either YHWH or YHVH, is represented as "the LORD" (in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS) in almost all Bible translations. Whereas one might see representations of God's name such as "Yahweh" or "Jehovah" used in various scholastic books and references, your average Christian can be somewhat separated from the profound theological significance of God's name.

While the Divine Name YHWH is present in the Hebrew Old Testament all the way back at the beginning of Genesis, the first major instance that we see of its usage appears when God commissions Moses to return to Egypt to deliver Israel in Exodus 3. Moses asks the Lord, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3:13). God first tells Moses that He is "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14), which can appear to be a somewhat elusive description of His eternity. He ultimately responds with, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD [meaning YHWH], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations" (Exodus 3:15). The challenge with these verses is not understanding that God reveals His name YHWH to Moses on Mount Sinai, but with what appears later: "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but *by* My name, LORD [meaning YHWH], I did not make Myself known to them" (Exodus 6:3). At face value, this would appear to mean that the Patriarchs did not know the Divine Name YHWH. But to your average Bible reader, how is this to be reconciled with what Genesis 4:26 says? After the birth of Seth, it is said that "men began to call upon the name of the LORD [meaning YHWH]."

An obvious answer to the disparities between Exodus 6:3 and Genesis 4:26 as proposed by source critics is that "the worship of Yahweh is considered to derive from antediluvian antiquity, in contrast to the traditions in Exod. 3:14 (E); 6:3 (P), which consider Moses to be the first recipient of this revealed personal name of God."⁵ Conservative responses to source criticism may be somewhat weak, when it infers, "for the author of the Book of Genesis the worship of the Lord established at the time of Moses was not something new but rather a return to the worship of the only and true God."⁶ If one affirms literary unity of the Pentateuch, it is possible that a particular aspect of God's nature is revealed by Genesis 4:26 employing the name YHWH to make an important theological point with the Flood narrative following in ch. 6. Other solutions, such as the pre-Flood society knowing the name YHWH and then it being forgotten until the time of Moses, have also been proposed.⁷ As with so many issues, we may never have a definitive answer.

Regardless of whether people knew the name YHWH or not before the time of Moses, we do see God revealing His name to Israel at the very important point in their history. They are

⁴ Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 111.

⁵ John H. Marks, "Genesis," in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 7.

⁶ John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in Frank E. Gaebel, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:69.

⁷ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1965), 16.

about to be delivered from Egyptian bondage, taken to the base of Mount Sinai, and given the Law that will make them a holy people. They need to know that “I AM WHO I AM” is watching them and taking care of them. They need to know that how they interact with Him reflects on their character and the mission that He has given for them.

Throughout the Old Testament, we see figures in Israel calling upon the name of YHWH for comfort, strength, and endurance. The Psalmist declares “O YHWH, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (8:9, NIV modified) and “Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, YHWH, have never forsaken those who seek you” (9:10, NIV modified). Proverbs 8:10 explains, “The name of YHWH is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe” (RSV modified). There are many, many verses that praise not the name of “the LORD” per se, but specifically the name of YHWH. Space does not permit us to examine all of them, but anyone who reads the Old Testament frequently has certainly come across phrases that extol the name of “the LORD.” All one needs to do is substitute YHWH with “the LORD” and know that God’s proper name is being used.

But if God’s proper name of YHWH appears throughout the Old Testament, why do most Bibles render it as “the LORD”? Why does the first place we see the name YHWH often have to be in a scholastic journal or book? I was first confronted with this subject as an undergraduate at the University of Oklahoma (1999-2003), when I began to take a few courses in Judaic studies. One resource that I was exposed to was the Orthodox Jewish ArtScroll Tanach translation, which differs from most English Bibles as it does not use “the LORD” to translate God’s name. Its translators explain, “In this work, the Four-Letter Name of God is translated ‘HASHEM,’ the pronunciation traditionally used for the Name to avoid pronouncing it unnecessarily.”⁸ The term *HaShem* (הַשֵּׁם) simply means “the Name,” and it is not uncommon to hear Orthodox Jews refer to God by this designation.

There are varied reasons as to why it is not common to hear the name YHWH in Christianity today, all going back to post-exilic Judaism’s interpretation of the Third Commandment. The preface to the Revised Standard Version says, “the use of any proper name for the one and only God, as though there were other gods from whom he had to be distinguished, was discontinued in Judaism before the Christian era and is entirely inappropriate for the universal faith of the Christian Church.”⁹ Some may take issue with the statement that it is “entirely inappropriate for the universal faith” for our Creator to be designated by a proper name. However, it is historically accurate that the speaking of the name of God aloud was discontinued in Judaism long before the time of Christ, as commonly speaking the name of God was considered synonymous with defaming it. Martin Rose comments in *ABD* that “Judaism had secured that the divine name should not be profaned any more. The divine name, once the ‘distinguishing mark’ of divine presence and immanence, had become the essence of God’s unapproachable holiness so that in the Jewish tradition ‘the Name’ (*haššēm*) could be synonymous with ‘God.’”¹⁰ Perhaps the most common substitution used in liturgy is the term *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי), meaning “Lord.” While no honest Jewish or Christian theologian will deny that the Lord has a special, memorial name, our widescale non-usage of it owes a great deal to how the Third Commandment was interpreted and applied in post-exilic Judaism, and the Judaism of Jesus’ time.

⁸ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Stone Edition Tanach* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1996), xxv.

⁹ *Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1952), v.

¹⁰ Martin Rose, “Names of God in the OT,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1010.

Most Jews who returned from captivity in Babylon considered it blasphemous to speak the Divine Name. This view is reflected in the Talmud, which states, “the Sages maintain: [Blasphemy] with use of the ineffable Name, is punishable by death: with the employment of substitutes, it is the object of an injunction” (b.*Sanhedrin* 56a).¹¹ Post-exilic Judaism historically maintained that if a person were to curse using the name YHWH in a sentence, he or she was to be given the death penalty. If it were just a curse with a title used in place of the Divine Name, then it was not worthy of death. The intention was likely to disallow instances where pagan individuals would curse using the Divine Name. The exile to Babylon was attributed to the possible misuse of the name of God on behalf of the Jewish nation, so when they returned a moratorium was placed on its usage by almost anyone.

There was one major exception to the almost total ban on using the name of God. Louis J. Rabinowitz indicates that “The prohibition against the pronunciation of the name of God applies only to the Tetragrammaton, which could be pronounced by the high priest only once a year on the Day of Atonement in the Holy of Holies...and in the Temple by the priests when they recited the Priestly Blessing.”¹² This precedent is recorded in the Mishnah, which tells us, ““And the priests and people standing in the courtyard, when they would hear the Expressed Name [of the Lord] come out of the mouth of the high priest, would kneel and bow down and fall on their faces and say, ‘Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever and ever’” (m.*Yoma* 6:2).¹³

When we compare these traditions to what we see during Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels, it appears almost certain that He follows this protocol. In the Gospels we see that Jesus actually spends more time calling His Father, “Father” or derivatives such as “Abba,” than referring to Him as God or Lord. If Jesus considered not speaking the name YHWH aloud to be a major error of His time, then there would be probably be sufficient evidence to convict the Jewish religious leaders in the New Testament of this offense—perhaps even including charges of blasphemy against Christ for verbalizing the name YHWH. While I do not doubt that the Lord knew the name YHWH, we do not see Him using it. If anything, the Apostles uphold the Jewish custom of *not using* the Divine Name of God, and using approved titles in its stead. Ironically, the author of 3 John writes, “they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles” (v. 7). The Greek employs the genitive form *tou onomatōs* (τοῦ ὀνόματος), which is translated in modern Hebrew New Testaments as, not surprisingly, *HaShem* (הַשֵּׁם).¹⁴ As New Testament believers wanting to emulate the orthopraxy of Jesus, should we not defer to His interpretation of the Third Commandment?

The Third Commandment prohibits the unwarranted usage of the Divine Name YHWH. In the pre-exilic period, we get the impression that Israel turned to the name YHWH for guidance and strength, but it is more than likely that with the idolatry that many fell prey to, the name YHWH was also used as a curse and that it was used in the parallel worship of other deities. Some might have one to Jerusalem to worship YHWH, but then went to another shrine to serve Baal or Molech. Others might simply have worshipped Baal or Molech, and used the name YHWH inappropriately when they were frustrated—no different than when someone today may slip and use “God” inappropriately. Should we be surprised that the Jews returning from exile wanted to protect the name of God? The Torah tells us that the name YHWH was revealed to

¹¹ *The Soncino Talmud. Judaic Classics Library II.* MS Windows 3.1. Brooklyn: Institute for Computers in Jewish Life, 1996. CD-ROM.

¹² Louis J. Rabinowitz, “God, Names of,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica. MS Windows 9x.* Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

¹³ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 275.

¹⁴ תורה נביאים כתובים והברית החדשה (Jerusalem: Bible Society in Israel, 1991), NT p 310.

Moses in a holy scene of fire and smoke—one that is to inspire deep awe and reverence. What happened when this name became so commonplace that it was used in the same sentence as various “bodily functions”? I do not believe that the Jews should be blamed for wanting to deter the usage of God’s name, and Jesus’ non-usage of it only confirms how reverent it is.

When we approach the subject of the name of God today as Christians, I do not believe that we need to be afraid when we hear the name “Yahweh” being spoken. We should pause for a moment, and think about how our Creator wants His name to be revered. We should remember that it was introduced to Israel at the time when He was getting ready to act and deliver them from bondage, defeating the Egyptian superpower. We should think about Israel at the base of Mount Sinai being given the Law and their mission from God to be a holy people. These are all concepts and ideas that are to draw us toward Him and likewise call us to greater perfection. They cause us to consider the varied views of the Third Commandment and whether or not we are truly honoring the Lord when we invoke Him—whether it be with the name YHWH, or with a title such as God. Does it bring Him glory? Does it reflect His character present within us. I would pray that I bring glory to God when I represent Him in the world.

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