

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

Misuing the Name of God

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exodus 20:7, NASU).

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The mainstream interpretation of the Third Commandment among conservative Christians and Jews is that we are prohibited from using the terms God, Lord, and for Christians, the Messiah’s English name Jesus Christ, as blasphemous slurs. **None of us should disagree with this in any respect.** A common Jewish interpretation is that taking the “name of God” in vain may likewise include swearing falsely with Him as a witness. The NJPS version renders Exodus 20:7 as, “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.” Traditional Jewish approaches to the Third Commandment prohibit usage of the name of God for no good reason.¹

We can all agree that using terms for God for no valid purpose is indeed violating the Third Commandment. Even more so, we can likewise agree that when people claim to speak in the authority of God, when in actuality they are not doing so, they have violated the Third Commandment.

Aside from these obvious issues, one interpretation of the Third Commandment has arisen in many sectors of the broad Messianic community, in recent years, regarding the proper name of God. In the actual Hebrew texts of Scripture, the name that is commonly rendered in Bibles as “the LORD,” is actually God’s proper name of YHWH/YHVH: the Hebrew letters *yud, hey, vav, hey*. In the Second Temple Judaism of the Messiah, the Divine Name was never spoken aloud, and was instead substituted with titles such as *Adonai*, meaning “my Lord,” or *HaShem*, meaning “the Name.” There are those in today’s independent

¹ Nosson Scherman, ed., et. al., *The ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 409.

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Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement who stridently believe that we should speak the Divine Name of God.

One of the major criticisms that quite a few people have of Judaism, in general, is Judaism's avoidance of using the proper name of God. Many people in the Hebrew Roots movement regularly speak God's proper name, YHWH, often pronounced either Yahweh or Yahveh,² and believe that Judaism is in error for failing to use it. Some have even accused the Jewish people of "hiding the name of God" from them, and believe that failure to speak the proper name of God is a "gross error" of Judaism. However, the prefaces to most English Bibles include a brief section on the name of God, as indicated here by the preface to the New American Standard Bible:

"The Proper Name of God in The Old Testament: In the Scriptures, the name of God is most significant and understandably so. It is inconceivable to think of spiritual matters without a proper designation for the Supreme Deity. Thus the most common name for the Deity is God, a translation of the original *Elohim*. One of the titles for God is Lord, a translation of *Adonai*. There is yet another name which is particularly assigned to God as His special or proper name, that is, the four letters YHWH (Exodus 3:14 and Isaiah 42:8). This name has not been pronounced by the Jews because of reverence for the great sacredness of the divine name. Therefore, it has been consistently translated LORD. The only exception to this translation of YHWH is when it occurs in immediate proximity to the word Lord, that is, *Adonai*. In that case it is regularly translated GOD in order to avoid confusion.

"It is known that for many years YHWH has been transliterated as Yahweh, however no complete certainty attaches to this pronunciation."³

The NASB, a widely used conservative Protestant Bible version, follows in the wake of Jewish tradition which considers the Divine Name of God to be so reverent that it is not to be spoken. (No one can claim that the Divine Name has been "hidden"; the most that people can really say is that they have failed to read their Bible's preface.) The name YHWH is rendered with the title "the LORD," with "LORD" appearing in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS. While the New American Standard gives the reason of following Jewish tradition for rendering the proper name of God as "LORD," the Revised Standard Version, a more liberal translation, gives a different reason. The RSV preface states,

"[T]he 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."⁴

² Other forms that one will now commonly encounter, since the mid-to-late 2010s, include Yahuah or Yehovah.

³ *NASB Text Edition* (Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997), iv.

⁴ *Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1952), v.

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 Yeshua, as commonly speaking the name of God was considered synonymous with defaming it.

While it is absolutely true that our Heavenly Father has a name, we should agree as Believers that whatever Yeshua and the Apostles did concerning its usage should be what we do. In contrast to what those who largely advocate its usage may say, there is not a single instance in the Apostolic Scriptures of Yeshua or the Apostles ever speaking the name YHWH. By the period of Second Temple Judaism, the name of God was only spoken on *Yom Kippur* or the Day of Atonement in the Temple by the high priest. The Mishnah reflects these traditions that existed in the Judaism of Yeshua’s day:

“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).⁵

Within the Judaism of Yeshua’s day the people used terms such as “the Temple,” “the Place,” “the Kingdom,” “Heaven,” or even “the Name” to refer to God. This custom extended into early Christianity as well with Christians using “God” and “Lord” to refer to the Supreme Deity. The Gospel of Matthew especially reflects Second Temple conventions, as it frequently employs “Heaven” or “Kingdom of Heaven,” simply to refer to God.

Neither Yeshua nor the Apostles made using the name YHWH an issue, **and they fully adhered to the Jewish custom that was prevalent in the First Century.** We would all do well to do the same. Using the proper name of God, as is too commonplace in throughout the Hebrew Roots movement, is considered insulting by our Jewish brethren and is not something that Yeshua did during His Earthly ministry. The Jewish people of the First Century and the Jewish people of today hold the name of God in such high regard and holiness that they consider it to be blasphemous to pronounce it with human lips. While pronouncing God’s name might not be “blasphemy,” per se, we must treat it with holiness and respect *by not speaking it casually.* Those who insist on using God’s proper name have not done a significant amount of good, they have brought a great deal of unnecessary division to the Messianic community, and have also severely complicated its necessary outreach to the Jewish community.⁶

⁵ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 275.

⁶ For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “Sacred Name Concerns” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

Some other useful thoughts, to witness how the Sacred Name agenda has caused severe problems with many of today’s Messianic Jews, are seen in Aaron Eby and Toby Janicki,

When we consider the scope of the Third Commandment, any term that we use to refer to our Heavenly Father must be used in reverence. We should not just throw terms like God or Lord around casually, especially in statements that we make. Many people violate the Third Commandment by saying “God told me this” or “the Lord showed me something,” when people are not talking to or hearing from our Creator in the least. Furthermore, if we follow the example of Yeshua and the Apostles, we never see them speaking God’s proper name. In their day-to-day Hebrew speech they would have used *Adonai* and *Elohim* to refer to the Holy One. When the Apostles went out to proclaim the good news in the Mediterranean, they used the Greek equivalents *Kurios* and *Theos*.⁷ Today, the English equivalents of these are Lord and God, and Jewish people have no problems using these terms. **Neither should we.**

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 9

1. What is the standard Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Third Commandment? What do you think of it?
2. Why might the Third Commandment be associated with “swearing falsely” in some Jewish theology?
3. Explain the significance of the name of God. Why does Judaism not use it?
4. Do you believe we should speak the name of God? To what extent should we follow Yeshua’s and the Apostles’ example on the matter?

Hallowed Be Your Name: Sanctifying God’s Sacred Name (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2008).

⁷ Consult the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “God & Lord, Pagan Titles.”