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The Ten Words/Commandments: Jewish and Christian Understandings



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Luther Hall, 4026 Macon Road
6:00 p.m. Wednesdays starting January 17*

Part 1: January 17-February 7

- Session 1: The Decalogue: What are the Ten Commandments; What is the first Commandment?
- Session 2: "You Shall Have No Other Gods"
- Session 3: "You Shall Not Make a Graven Image;" "You Shall not Bow Down to Them"
- Session 4: "You Shall Not Swear Falsely By God's Name"

Part 2 (After Easter, dates TBA)

- Session 5: "You Shall Keep The Sabbath"
- Session 6: "Honor Your Father and Your Mother"
- Session: 7: "You Shall Not Commit Murder;" "You Shall Not Commit Adultery;:" "You Shall Not Steal"
- Session 8: "You Shall Not Bear False Witness"
- Session 9: "You Shall Not Covet"
- Session 10: Review and Wrap-Up

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Part 4: "You shall not swear falsely by God's name"

Hebrew, with Jewish Publication Society Translation (2006, used by permission)

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׂוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה יְהוָה אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא
אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשׂוּא

You shall not swear falsely by the name of יהוה your God; for יהוה will not clear one who swears falsely by God's name.

Septuagint, 3rd c. BCE

οὐ λήψει τὸ ὄνομα Κυρίου τοῦ Θεοῦ σου ἐπί ματαίῳ· οὐ γὰρ μὴ καθαρῖση Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου τὸν λαμβάνοντα τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ ματαίῳ.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God as though it were worthless; for the LORD your God will not cleanse anyone taking his name as though it were worthless.

Vulgate, 4th c, CE

Non adsumes nomen Domini Dei tui in vanum nec enim habebit insontem Dominus eum qui adsumpserit nomen Domini Dei sui frustra

You shall not take up and use the name of the LORD your God as if it were empty; for neither will the LORD hold guiltless the one who takes us and uses the name of the Lord God for no good end.

Luther's German Bible, 16th c, CE

Du sollst den Namen des HERRN, deines Gottes, nicht mißbrauchen; denn der HERR wird den nicht ungestraft lassen, der seinen Namen mißbraucht.

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD, your God; for the LORD will not leave unpunished anyone who misuses his Name.

What's in a Name?

A name in many cultures in Ancient Near East (southwest Asia) were understood to create a claim on the person and the power of the person called by that name.

This understanding of what names do underlies multiple stories in both the Hebrew Bible and Christian scripture.

There is the story of Jacob wrestling with the "angel," where Jacob insists on asking the angel to "tell me your name." This is an attempt by Jacob to gain some power over the

angel by using the angel's name. Of course, the angel refuses, and instead Jacob and the angel wrestle all night long.

There is the story of the burning bush where Moses asks the voice from the bush for their name so Moses can say in whose name he claims to be coming to act as a leader and deliverer. Again, there is a kind of refusal to offer a name, and instead we get a statement: "Yihyeh asher yihyeh" (I will be what I will be). The implication is that you don't get a name you can use to claim any power over the Holy One. This is part of why YHWH is intended to be unpronounceable.

And in the Christian scriptures, we have Jesus demanding names from demons, as in the case of the man possessed by a "legion" of them, and then casting them out, as well as demons saying "I know who you are" to Jesus, but Jesus then telling them to "shut up and tell no one."

So, this sense of using names to exert power over the named one was a persistent idea over the centuries in these cultures.

As was another: the use of a name of something, someone, or some divine being as a warrant in cases of law, as in "I swear by Name that what I am saying is the truth." The idea of the use of the name in this case is a kind of claim "May Name bring a curse upon me if I have not spoken truthfully."

What is this commandment trying to address?

Over time, as we have seen, translations of this verse have varied a bit. This is owing in part to the nature of the Hebrew words involved. The structure is "take up my name for vanity/falsehood" (sha-ve in Hebrew). Which is it? Vanity, which points to careless use of the Divine Name, or falsehood, which points perhaps to a courtroom setting and false testimony?

Just as all translation is interpretation, interpretation in turn always depends principally on usage. So we'd need to know how this entire commandment was being used or applied before we could comment accurately on how to translate it.

Within third century BCE Hellenistic Judaism, the concern and the usage seems to have been focused on using the name of God carelessly or in an unworthy manner, as if the Divine Name has no value at all. Do not take... "epi mataiw." The word "mataioths" is one also used repeatedly in Ecclesiastes – and translated classically in English, "Vanity of vanity, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity" The sense of this in usage is emptiness, worthlessness, something of no ultimate value. It points toward treating the Divine Name with disrespect.

The Latin in the Christian translation uses two different words (vanum, source of our word "vain," and frustra, source of our word frustration) for the same Hebrew term (sha-ve). It is

as if the Latin is trying to cover more of the bases for what this term could mean, but also that it is not, in the use of the term itself, necessarily settling on either of them. Where it seems to “push” in the courtroom direction, maybe, is in the choice of the verb used to translate the actual commandment – non adsumes – do not “take up” or “take upon yourself.” This implies some intentionality about the use of the name, and if understood as “take upon oneself” points to the courtroom sense—but more as treating the name as if it didn’t matter how it was used there, rather than directly using it to give credence to some falsehood.

Finally, we come to the German of Martin Luther. Here, rather than the construction being “take... in vain/falsely” the verb conveys a definite sense of misusing or abusing the Divine Name. The courtroom setting may be in view, but it appears to be so metaphorically at most.

What is the consequence? And what might that tell us?

The Hebrew (yenaqqeh) points to not “clearing” or we might say “acquitting” the one who does what this commandment forbids. This points toward courtroom usage, as well.

The Septuagint uses a similar but not equivalent Greek verb (katharisee), but one that in Greek connotes much more a sense of moral purity. This tends more toward focusing on careless use of the Divine Name as something that generates moral impurity in the one who does so.

The Latin (insonentem, which, with habere means “hold guiltless”) also points to a courtroom idea, but, again, with the two different words (vanum, frustra) doesn’t necessarily settle there. The idea of the court could still be metaphorical rather than literal, and more focused on the final judgment, as it were, than to what would happen in the courtroom at the moment when the Divine Name is “taken upon oneself.”

The German seems to address the courtroom again, with its consequence of not leaving the abuser of the Divine Name *unpunished*. But also, again, points toward the final judgment and punishment in hell, perhaps, for committing so grievous a sin as this. Here, Luther seems to be, in the translation at least, aligning this with something like blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which cannot be forgiven, the synoptic gospels note, either in this age nor in the age to come. The application includes, but is far from limited to, the courtroom.

From Luther’s *Large Catechism*:

“It is misusing God’s name when we call upon the Lord God, no matter in what way, for purposes of falsehood or wrong of any kind. Therefore this commandment enjoins this much, that God’s name must not be appealed to falsely, or taken upon the lips, while the heart knows well enough, or should know, differently; as among those who take oaths in court, where one side lies against the other. 52 For God’s name cannot be misused worse than for the support of falsehood and deceit. Let this remain the exact German and simplest meaning of this commandment. (Source: <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten->

[commandments/#lc-i-0051](#))

[T]o tell it in a few words, all misuse of the divine name occurs, first, in worldly business and in matters which concern money, possessions, honor, whether it be publicly in court, in the market, or wherever else men make false oaths in God's name, or pledge their souls in any matter. And this is especially prevalent in marriage affairs, where two go and secretly betroth themselves to one another, and afterward abjure [their plighted troth].

But, the greatest abuse occurs in spiritual matters, which pertain to the conscience, when false preachers rise up and offer their lying vanities as God's Word. Source:

<https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/#lc-i-0053>

Therefore, above all things, our young people should have this commandment earnestly enforced upon them, and they should be trained to hold this and the First Commandment in high regard; and whenever they transgress, we must at once be after them with the rod, and hold the commandment before them, and constantly inculcate it, so as to bring them up not only with punishment, but also in the reverence and fear of God. Source:

<https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/#lc-i-0061>

Hence it is a natural inference, since using the holy name for falsehood or wickedness is here forbidden, that we are, on the other hand, commanded to employ it for truth and for all good, as when one swears truly where there is need and it is demanded. So also when there is right teaching, and when the name is invoked in trouble or praised and thanked in prosperity. Source: <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/#lc-i-0064>

Core questions for reflection:

1. Do you invoke the name of God as a warrant when you are making false claims? If not, then how does the courtroom sense of this commandment apply to you?
2. Do you use the name of God carelessly, not respecting who God is and therefore, by such misuse of the Divine Name, bringing it to shame rather than glory? If so, what will it take to get you to stop?
3. Do you use the Divine Name (or a reference to it) regularly and well, whether as a warrant for truth, or intentionally only to talk about God or to seek God or to bless God? If not, how might you begin doing so and make this, rather than never calling upon or praising God, your habit?