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Blasphemy, Risk and the Name of God

Mac S. Sandlin

*“The penalty that must be paid for man,
I knew in benefiting man...but this...
Ah! No, I did not dream of pangs like these
—Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound*

“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 20.7¹

Given the brevity of the Decalogue, one might wonder why taking the Lord’s name in vain is given attention when so many other issues remain unaddressed. This is especially true when the third commandment is reduced to meaning simply “Don’t use God’s name as a cuss word,” or “Don’t lie when you swear in God’s name.” However, for the people of God there is nothing more serious than proper treatment of God’s name since it is only by the revelation of that name that we know God. Moreover, as people called by his name, it is only by its revelation that we can truly know ourselves. The third commandment, perhaps more than any other, pulls our conversations about the Decalogue out of the realm of natural law and forces us to come to grips with the particular and relational character of these covenant stipulations.²

Historically, the third commandment has most often been connected with oaths.³ To lie in God’s name is to make God a party to our lies and is forbidden; thus for many medieval and early modern thinkers, the commandment was closely tied to law courts and the guarantee of honest testimony in court.⁴ The prohibition against vain usage of God’s name, however, has a much broader scope than this. God has called Israel to bear his name, not just on her lips, but as an essential marker of her identity. The familiar Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6.22–26:

1. All biblical citations in this essay are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

2. J. Budziszewski argues that taking the Lord’s name in vain should be understood as simply using empty speech about God. The knowledge of this command he takes to be both natural and universal, but Budziszewski fails to reckon with the particularity of the Name of God and the particularity of the people given the command. See J. Budziszewski, *What We Can’t Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas: Spence, 2003), 28–50, and a response to this argument in Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 41–53.

3. Calvin ties the third commandment tightly to the ninth and focuses his discussion of it almost exclusively on oath-taking. The law prohibits all forms of profanity, he says, “But the commandment refers especially to the case of oaths, in which a perverse employment of the divine name is particularly detestable.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), II.viii.22.

4. Ephraim Radner has an excellent discussion of this theme and its connection to natural law in Aquinas and John Locke. “Taking the Lord’s Name in Vain” in *I Am the Lord Your God: Reflections on the Ten Commandments*, eds. Christopher R. Seitz and Carl E. Braaten (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 77–94.

The LORD bless you and keep you;
 The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
 The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace,”

is not simply a ritual blessing. The very next verse tells us that this is the formula by which “they shall put my name upon the people of Israel and I will bless them” (Num 6.27). The heart of the commandment is rooted in God’s identity and reputation in the world.⁵ Not only is Israel forbidden to lie in God’s name, she cannot do anything which will dishonor his name among the nations.⁶

Idolatry, injustice and evil are blights on any people, but they are infinitely worse when committed by those clothed in the name of YHWH since the sins of the people ruin his reputation in the world.⁷ Because God has been so gracious as not only to reveal his name to this people, but even to put his name on them and thereby to dwell among them, Israel is able to dishonor God in a way that no other nation can.⁸ Yet God is willing to risk this dishonor because of his love for Israel and for the creation he intends to redeem through her.

God binds himself to Israel because he loves her, but also—and I would argue primarily—because she is his instrument to repair the damage humanity has done to his good creation. Indeed, biblically, election always seems to come in the service of mission. Abraham is called and blessed so that he might be a blessing to all nations (Gen 12.1–3). This blessing is, as Wright points out, “strongly connected with creation and all of the good gifts that God longs for people to enjoy in his world—abundance, fruitfulness, and fertility, long life, peace, and rest,” all of which are to be enjoyed “in the context of healthy relationships with God and with others.”⁹ Just as God created woman to be both a companion and a partner for man, so God chooses the people of Israel to be his spouse and his suitable helper in the task of redemption (Isa 54.5–8; Jer 3; Hos 2.14–20). The covenants are the means by which this bond is solidified.

Covenanting is by its very nature an act of self-limitation. This tendency to share power in order to partner with creation is characteristic of God from the very beginning. In Genesis 1 God commands the earth to bring forth plants rather than simply saying, “Let there be plants.” He delegates governance of day and night and the changing seasons to the heavenly hosts. He finishes his work by making man and woman in his image and giving them authority over all that lives.¹⁰ When he makes his covenant with Noah and all living things, God hangs his weapon in the sky, promising never again to exercise his power to destroy the earth by a flood.¹¹ And in choosing to bless all nations of the earth through Abraham and his seed, God embarks on a kenotic journey towards the incarnation and the cross. At Sinai the covenant deepens, and God intensifies his involvement with and commitment to Israel. He thereby risks even more for the sake of his mission to redeem the world.¹²

5. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 227.

6. It may strike us as odd to imagine that God is concerned about what heathen peoples think of his character, but the Old Testament displays this as a major concern in divine decision-making. Moses’ response to God’s stated intention to wipe out Israel at Mt. Sinai is, “What will the Egyptians say about you if you do that?” and it is this appeal to the God’s reputation that seems to stay divine judgment (Exod 32.11–14).

7. YHWH, the covenant name for God, is typically translated LORD, and is represented as such in the rest of this essay.

8. Israel’s failure to honor God’s name forced God to act in judgment upon her. So Ezekiel writes, “Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but *for the sake of my holy name*, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. *And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name*, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that *I am the LORD*, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes” (Ezek 36.22–23, emphasis added).

9. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 221.

10. For more on this theme, see John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009); Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) and especially Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

11. Paul J. Kissling, “The Rainbow in Genesis 9:12–17: A Triple Entendre?” *Stone Campbell Journal* 4 (2001): 249–261.

12. See Wright, *The Mission of God*, especially chapters 6 and 7.

Given the vulnerability that such an act of grace creates in God we can view the third commandment as a way of protecting God and his mission in the world from the dangers inherent in covenanting with a people, especially one as stiff-necked and rebellious as Israel (Exod 32.9; 33.3, 5; 34.9). However, it is not God alone who is made vulnerable by the act of covenanting. The bestowing of God's name on Israel also puts them at risk. The name of God is "a kind of surrogate, a representation of the deity... [It], therefore, is freighted with all the power and holiness that is God's."¹³ In giving his name to Israel, God comes down to dwell in the midst of the people, a prospect that—for those who know the holiness of the LORD God—is as terrifying as it is beautiful. To have a wildly holy God making his home in the midst of a consistently unholy people is a startlingly dangerous proposition. Israel seems to realize this when God delivers the Decalogue directly to the people. In the face of the storm of God's righteous presence at Sinai, Israel says to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Given the danger which God's presence places the people in, the prohibition against taking God's name in vain is given, at least in part, out of God's concern for Israel. This desire to protect the people from the consequences of his immanent holiness is rooted not only in God's love for his people, but also in his concern for the preservation and redemption of creation which he intended to accomplish through them. Israel is God's child, his bride, his family—but she is also his partner, and his instrument to bring about his purposes. For both of these reasons, he cautions her not to dishonor his name and thereby be destroyed.

The investiture of power necessitates the clear descriptions of how that power is and is not to be used. When my father taught me how to handle a hunting rifle, he was incredibly strict about how to properly hold it, how to carry it, how to check the safety and how to aim it. Certainly part of that rigorous training was motivated by his fear that he could be shot, but there was also concern for me and for the environment around me. Guns are not treated casually or profanely precisely because they hold the power of life and death. How much more potent is the name of God!¹⁴ Like Promethean fire, the gift of God's name ennobles and empowers Israel to bless the world. It is the sign of hope for a humanity floundering in the darkness, but this blessing also enables her to burn and destroy herself and those whom she was called to save from darkness and chaos. This is not to crudely imply that the name of God is a magic word by which Israel could manipulate divine power. Like the Ark of the Covenant, the name of God is imbued with holiness and power, but it is the personal holiness and the personal power of the living God, a lesson painfully but clearly articulated in the story of Hophni and Phinehas and David's attempts to bring the ark to Jerusalem (1 Sam 4; 2 Sam 6).¹⁵ Because of Israel's failure to properly honor God and the symbols of his presence, both she and the Philistines suffered death and plague at God's hands. The power of God's name was not given to Israel to satisfy the selfish whims of ambitious Israelites; it was given for the salvation of world.

The name was bestowed on Israel so that she might hold it up as a light to the nations and bless them thereby (Isa 49.6; Gen 12.3). She was to rightly bear the image of the one who is named:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation (Exod 34.6–7).

Israel, however, failed in this task. Before the tablets on which the Decalogue is written can be delivered, she has given the name of God to a vain idol. Aaron points to the golden calf and declares, "These are your

13. Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments of the Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church Series* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 79–80. Note that the giving of the name of God in Exodus 3.12–15 and 34.6–7 is associated with divine presence. It is possible to interpret the burning bush in Exodus 3 as God's presence with Moses (cf. NJPS).

14. Note the parallel between the name of God and his power in Psalm 106.8. "Yet he saved them for his name's sake / that he might make known his mighty power."

15. Note the strong connection between the ark and the name of God in 2 Sam 6.2, "the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim." Interestingly, the vain usage of the ark/name in this incident is a physical rather than a verbal act.

gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Exod 32.4). God’s desire was to be with his people as the fire on Mt. Horeb was with the bush – burning with all its intensity without consuming the bush around it, but human sinfulness prevented this from happening.¹⁶ Israel’s idolatry and injustice continually profaned the name of God.¹⁷ Because of this sin, God punished Israel with plagues, invasions and, ultimately, exile. Moreover, Israel’s failure to keep the commandments further meant that the Gentiles had no light, no holy people to point the way to God, and so God’s redemptive mission was thwarted.¹⁸

The Babylonian Exile was God’s effort to remove his name from Israel. God’s promise of judgment in 2 Kings 23.27 is that he will remove the city and the temple of which he had said, “My name will be there.” Hosea divorces his wife and names his final child with the curse, *Lo-ammi* (“You are not my people”). The curse of Gomer and *Lo-ammi*, which falls upon the people of Israel, is God’s voice saying to them, “You are not my people. You are not called by my name.”¹⁹ This is the consequence of taking the LORD’s name in vain. Nevertheless, God had promised to bless the world through Israel, to make his name to dwell with her, and what God has promised, he will fulfill.

Like Hosea who pays with all of his silver and then dips into his stores of food to buy back his unfaithful wife, God will sacrifice all to redeem Israel and put his name upon her again. God will call out to *Lo-ammi* and say, “You are my people”; and *Lo-ammi* shall respond with, “You are my God” (Hos 2.23). Indeed it is precisely by the exile and return that God will teach Israel his name again.

I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name. They shall forget their shame and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they dwell securely in their land with none to make them afraid.... Then they shall know that I am the LORD their God, because I sent them into exile among the nations and then assembled them into their own land (Ezek 39.25–28).

Though the people did return from exile and rebuild the temple, the glory of the LORD did not reenter his house.²⁰ The people continued to profane the name of God, and as a result, the voice of the prophets was silenced (Mal 1.6–2:1; Amos 8.11–12).²¹ God however, was preparing for a still greater risk. Israel had not kept the commandment to honor God’s name, but God was determined to make his name to dwell with this people and to bless all nations through Abraham’s seed. So the name was restored to the one who carried out the mission with which God had entrusted Israel. The true Israelite bore up the name of God righteously and

16. I am indebted to Kevin Youngblood for this perspective on the burning bush. For the full illustration, see his sermon on the Holiness of God delivered at Harding University chapel on September 7, 2012, available for download from iTunesU.

17. Though Israel’s sins are as varied as they are numerous, the themes of idolatry and injustice dominate the prophetic oracles of judgment. Thus the call to repentance in Jeremiah’s temple sermon is, “For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you execute justice on with another...and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place” (Jer 7.5–7).

18. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 31. Drawing on Jeremiah 4.2, Bauckham points out that, “It is Israel’s fulfillment of her covenant obligations, her practice of truth, justice, and righteousness, that will bring blessings to the nations.... In order for the nations to be blessed Israel need only be faithful to YHWH. Her life with YHWH will itself draw the nations to YHWH so that they too may experience his blessing.” The future of the nations could have been different than the judgments Jeremiah delivered from God had Israel fulfilled her calling.

19. This is made explicit in Hosea 1.9 where the Hebrew can literally be translated, “...you are not my people, and I will no longer be I AM to you.” This language is a reversal of bestowal of the divine name, *I AM*, in Exodus 3.14.

20. Despite the fact that the prophets declared that the new temple would surpass Solomon’s in glory and splendor (e.g. Ezek 43.1–7; Hag 2.7–9), this promise was never fulfilled outside of Christ. “At no point is the house again filled with the cloud which veils his glory. At no point is the rebuilt Temple universally hailed as the true restored shrine spoken of by Ezekiel.” N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 621.

21. Malachi draws special attention to the dishonoring of God’s name by the post-exilic community of Jews and promises judgment upon all of those except “...you who fear my name,” upon whom “the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (Mal 4.2).

he was the light of the world. In the face of his exile unto to death, his prayer was not “Father, save me from this hour,” but “Father, glorify thy name” (John 12.27–28). Through him the Father did glorify his name again by the death and resurrection of his beloved one; therefore, he has been given “the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2.9–11). When Jesus is given the title *Lord*, this is no mere attribution of honor, but an identification of Jesus as the God of Israel. Jesus Christ is the LORD who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and quick to forgive, and he is the judge who will not leave the guilty unpunished.

Christ inherits this name and this title through his obedience even unto death, and those who are called by his name are to imitate this obedience. The mission of God that began with Abraham and was fulfilled in Christ continues in the Church. The Church embodies and proclaims the gospel in the world because God has seen fit in these last days to pour out his Spirit on all flesh so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2.21). But to call on that name and inherit that salvation is to make ourselves vulnerable to God and, at the same time, to join God in his vulnerability to creation. We must reject as idolatrous our own private markers of identity and be called anew by his name as he has revealed it to us. This means that we cannot use God as a tool to drive our personal, political or ecclesiological agendas. Rather, we must lay those agendas at his feet and see them anew. Bonhoeffer put it this way, “There is no genuine gratitude for nation, family, history, and nature without a deep repentance that honors Christ alone above all these gifts.”²²

Yet, who is capable of such a transformation? Who can call on the name of the Lord knowing that we invite God into a life and a heart filled with blasphemies and lies? Radner expresses the risk we take on every time we use the name of God when he says, “The name, in its utterance, judges the utterer.”²³ How can we accept the gift of fire, knowing that we will mishandle it and be consumed? We have boldness to reach out and take hold of the fire only because another has borne the pain of our blasphemies already, has himself become our sin and borne it. And so we speak the name with fear and trembling and with bold confidence in one breath—the *I* within us whispering a prayer laced with the profane but the Spirit of holiness within us crying out to God in words and groans too deep and pure for our blasphemous words to express.

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22. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, vol. 4 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 96.

23. Radner, 80.