

Ten Commandments

Lesson 4 Article

Names

Yahweh's name signified his essence. In any culture, modern or ancient, a name is a verbal symbol for a person or thing, and the ancients in particular obviously appreciated the way names connoted the very value, character, and influence of a person or thing. To speak Yahweh's name was to recognize his awesome power and holiness and even to invite his response to one's particular situation at the moment. Those who had not obeyed Yahweh might well fear even to mention his name out loud lest he respond by appearing in some fashion among them. Thus Amos 6:10 describes those wishing no contact with Yahweh's judgment against them as saying, "Hush! We must not mention the name of the LORD." Jesus reinforced and clarified this commandment with regard to making false promises (swearing falsely/uttering false oaths) that invoked God's name by banning the practice of invoking anything as a guarantor of honesty altogether, including any substitution for the divine name in an oath (Matt 5:33–37; 23:16–22; cf. Jas 5:12), thus virtually eliminating any kind of oaths and requiring one's word to be one's bond in any promise.⁴³¹

Punishment

The punishment for breaking this commandment remains unspecified and therefore could in theory take any form of God's choosing, from something relatively minor to death. Jeremiah provides examples of serious punishments when, for instance, a prophet speaks lies in Yahweh's name (a severe example of misusing Yahweh's name), including death for both the dishonest prophets and those who by believing their dishonest words also participate in the profanation of the divine name (Jer 14:14–16), banishment and death (Jer 27:15), or death at the hand of captors in exile (Jer 29:21).

To "hold guiltless" (*yěnaqqeh*) connotes "letting someone get away without punishment."⁴⁴ That is expressly what Yahweh will not do if his name is misused.²

⁴³ The phrase "so help me God" was designed not be understood as an oath invoking the name of God but a specialized type of prayer for assistance in telling the truth. The commandment against using God's name in vain need not be regarded as broken by such an oath in court.

¹ Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Vol. 2: Exodus*. The New American Commentary (456). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴⁴ In the eighteen usages in the OT of the *piel* of *nqh*, a remarkable degree of consistency appears, so the concept behind the verb is relatively clear, with such generally synonymous definitions as "clear the guilty," "hold guiltless," "declare innocent," and "acquit" emerging logically from an inductive examination of the data.

² Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Vol. 2: Exodus*. The New American Commentary (456–457). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.