

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT (EXOD 20:7; DEUT 5:11)

Overview

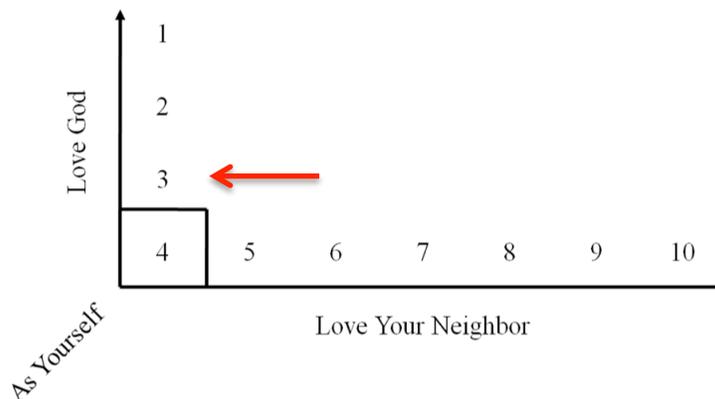
- I. Clarification of the Author’s Original Meaning
- II. Insights about God and His Ways from the Text
- III. Application of the Theological Insights to Our Context

ESV	NIV
⁷ “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.”	⁷ “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”

I. Clarification of the Author’s Original Meaning

A. The Literary Context

1. The prohibition against taking the Lord’s name in vain is the third of the Ten Commandments (using the Reformed/Anglican enumeration scheme). Consequently, it is one of the “vertical” laws in the collection, given the literary arrangement we are advocating in these studies:
 - a. Commandments 1-3 focus on some key responsibilities to God (vertical).
 - b. Commandments 5-10 focus on some key responsibilities to others (horizontal).
 - c. Commandment 4 focuses on a key responsibility to God, to others, and to oneself (vertical-horizontal-personal).



2. As noted previously, this structure corresponds to Jesus’ summary statement of the entire law (Matt 22:37-40; Luke 10:26-28). Indeed, the Ten Commandments begin with a vertical orientation (“**I am Yahweh your God**” in 20:2a) and end with a horizontal orientation (“**your neighbor**” in 17d). The fourth commandment is the pivot point of the collection, encompassing a vertical, horizontal, and personal orientation.

3. As the third of the Ten Commandments, the prohibition against taking the Lord's name in vain represents one of Israel's key responsibilities to God, following the concerns of the first commandment ("no other gods before me") and the second commandment ("you shall not make for yourself an idol").

B. Shift to the Third Person

1. Up to this point in the Decalogue, God has used first person pronouns ("I," "me," and "my") in speaking and writing his laws to Israel. In the third commandment, however, he switches to the third person: "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."
2. Since the pattern breaks at this point, it is reasonable to ask why there is a shift in person. Why does God not say, for example, "You shall not take **my name** in vain, for **I** will not hold him guiltless who takes **my name** in vain"?
3. The most likely answer is that God switches to the third person in order to be able to highlight his special covenant name, "**Yahweh**"—an impossibility if he simply speaks of "my name" in the third commandment. Recall that God revealed his special covenant name to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:10-15):

¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

¹² And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you [pl.] will worship God on this mountain."

¹³ Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "**I AM WHO I AM**. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: '**I AM** has sent me to you.' "

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, '**The LORD**, 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 forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.

4. Cast in the third person, then, this commandment is able to highlight "the name of the LORD ["Yahweh"] your God ["Elohim"]."

C. The Meaning of 'Take'

1. The word "take" (נָשָׂא, *nāśā*) means to "lift," "carry," "bear," or "take" (as in "grasping" something for the purpose of using it; e.g., Gen 27:3). To "take the LORD's name," then, includes *speaking* God's name because the expression is actually an ellipsis for taking the LORD's name upon one's mouth or lips.

- a. Psalm 16:4b

"I will not pour out their libations of blood
or take up [*nāśā*] their names on my lips.

- b. Numbers 23:7a

"And Balaam took up [*nāśā*] his discourse and said . . ."

c. Isaiah 14:4

“. . . you will take up [*nāśā*] this taunt against the king of Babylon”

d. Psalm 15:3

“. . . who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbor,
nor takes up [*nāśā*] a reproach against his friend.”

e. Psalm 50:16

“But to the wicked God says:
‘What right have you to recite my statutes
or take [*nāśā*] my covenant on your lips?’”

2. The broader meaning of *nāśā*, however, would suggest that more than simply uttering God’s name is in view. The high priest, for example, literally “carried” or “bore” the LORD’s name on his person while dressed in his full priestly regalia. The name “Yahweh” was engraved on a gold plate, which was fastened to his turban by a blue cord (Exod 28:36-38). Consequently, taking God’s name could also entail *representing* God in some capacity. It can mean taking the LORD’s name upon one’s life, identity, or vocation.
3. Two other passages in Exodus speak of bearing or carrying God’s name: (1) “Aaron is to bear [*nāśā*] the names [of the sons of Israel] on his shoulders as a memorial before the LORD” (Exod 28:12b); (2) “Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear [*nāśā*] the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the LORD” (Exod 28:29). In representing God’s people, the high priest was bearing the tribal *names* of God’s people.
4. Block suggests that bearing or carrying someone’s name is rooted in the practice of marking slaves or branding animals to indicate ownership. Thus God put his name not only on the *place* where he was to be worshiped (e.g., Deut 12:5), but also on his *people*, his “treasured possession” [*seḡūllā*] Israel. God goes on to say, for example, “If my people, **who are called by my name**, will humble themselves . . .” (2 Chron 7:14). The Apostle Peter wrote, “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that **you bear that name**” (1 Pet 4:16).
5. Such considerations have led Hamilton to conclude that Exodus 20:7 may be God’s way of saying, “Either honor my name, both by the way you live and by the way you talk, or else dissociate yourself from my name.” We will continue our clarification step to see if Hamilton’s conclusion is justified.

D. The Meaning of ‘Name’

1. “The Name” (*ha-šēm*) of God signifies much more than the spoken syllables by which he is known, or the mere pronouncing of his title of address. God’s name represents: (1) his being and person (e.g., Isa 24:15; Ps 20:1, 75:1); (2) his nature and character (e.g., Prov 18:10; Isa 30:27-28); and (3) his teaching and ways (e.g., Ps 22:22; Mic 4:5). As Oswalt says, “One’s name is a reflection of oneself.”
2. Biblical writers often refer to Yahweh as “the Name,” a usage that conservative Jews practice today—referring to God’s covenant name without actually using it. “Yahweh,” however, occurs nearly 7,000 times in the Old Testament, so the biblical writers did not use *ha-šēm* to avoid using the divine Name; it was simply another way of referring to God.

3. Stuart has noted, “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.”
4. Quite significantly, the expression “the Name” is sometimes used as a substitute for “Jesus” in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 5:40-42; Rom 10:9-13, quoting Joel 2:32). Such usage indicates the Apostles’ belief in the deity of Jesus.

E. The Meaning of ‘Vain’

1. The third commandment prohibits taking the LORD’s name “in vain” (כיִפֹּי, *shāv*), a word repeated at the end of the sentence. A glance at the English versions and various scholars’ translations reveals a range of meanings for the word “vain.”

a.	vain	(KJV, NASB, RSV, NET)
b.	misuse	(NIV, HCSB, LEB, JB, CEV)
c.	wrong use	(NEB)
d.	wrongful use	(NRSV)
e.	for evil purposes	(TEV)
f.	bring shame on	(NLT)
g.	swear falsely	(NJPS)
h.	use thoughtlessly	(NCV)
i.	use carelessly	(GW)
j.	use lightly	(CJB)
k.	of no significance	(CEB)
l.	deceptive	(Houtman)
m.	abuse	(Childs)
n.	for emptiness	(Fox)
o.	for unreality	(Cassuto)
p.	frivolously/falsely	(Hamilton)
q.	lightly/tritely	(Kaiser)
2. The varied English translations would suggest that, broadly speaking, the third commandment prohibits any use of God’s name that is false, flippant, and/or profane. The Amplified Bible, for example, translates *shāv* as “vain” and then offers in square brackets these alternatives: “lightly or frivolously, in false affirmations, or profanely.” *The Message Bible* also seeks to capture a range with this paraphrase of v. 7: “No using the name of GOD, your God, in curses or silly banter; GOD won’t put up with the irreverent use of his name.”
3. Even the Latin Vulgate seeks to capture more than one meaning. While the same Hebrew word in question (*shāv*) is used twice in Exodus 20:7, the Vulgate uses two different words to translate it: “*in vanum* [vain] . . . *frustra* [deception].”
4. On the other hand, the Greek Septuagint (LXX) translates the Hebrew word *shāv* with the same Greek word both times (μάταιος, *mataios*), which generally means “useless,” “worthless,” “futile,” or “vain” (cf. Jas 1:26; 1 Cor 3:20; Titus 3:9, etc.).
5. What is one to make of such a broad semantic range for this word? How does Exodus 20:7 want to be understood? Quite significantly, the Targum Jonathan (Aramaic Old Testament) and the Peshitta (Syriac Bible) both render v. 7: “You shall not **swear falsely** by the name of Yahweh, your God.” Understood this way, the command forbids swearing in God’s name for something that is a lie. This translation represents an early Jewish exegetical tradition.

6. Josephus concurs when he writes, “The first commandment teaches us that there is but one God, and that we ought to worship him only. The second commands us not to make the image of any living creature to worship it. The third, that **we must not swear by God in a false matter**. The fourth, that we must keep the seventh day, by resting from all sorts of work” (*Ant.* 3.91).
7. Indeed, the verb *nāsā*’ is often used in connection with taking an oath (i.e., lifting the hand, as in Exod 6:8; Num 14:30; 1 Kgs 8:31). False swearing, then, may be the central prohibition of the third commandment.
8. Still, the range of meanings that can legitimately fit the context of the third commandment could indicate the author’s intention to go beyond merely swearing falsely. Sarna notes, “The ambiguities allow for the [outlawing] of perjury by the principals in a lawsuit, swearing falsely, *and* the unnecessary or frivolous use of the divine Name.”

In a similar vein, Stuart writes, “the most basic, core idea behind this commandment is the prohibition of perjury. We must remember, however, that the commandment is worded generally enough to encompass any misuse of Yahweh’s name—from making light of it or overtly mocking it, to speaking about Yahweh in any way disrespectfully.”

Durham likewise concludes, “This commandment is couched in language deliberately chosen to permit a wide range of application, covering every dimension of the misuse of Yahweh’s name. . . . Not surprisingly, there are no incantation texts in the Old Testament.”

Houtman, Cassuto, and others concur that more than oath swearing is in view, citing a variety of practices that would be condemned under the third commandment:

- a. Offering false testimony in God’s name
- b. Offering false prophecy in God’s name
- c. Stating an oath in God’s name that one does not intend to fulfill
- d. Referring to God in a trivial, frivolous, empty, flippant, or profane way
- e. Asking for illegitimate things in God’s name (cf. James 4:3)
- f. Blasphemy or unwarranted curses in God’s name
- g. Magic, divination, incantations, hexing, necromancy, or fortune telling in God’s name

Oswalt concludes, “All of these things make God appear insignificant or faithless, that is, not holy. Thus, they defame his character.”

9. False Swearing

As false swearing appears to be the central prohibition of the third commandment, a closer look at the practice is warranted. Multiple biblical references to the practice would seem to suggest that it was a widespread problem in Israel.

- a. Leviticus 19:12

“Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.”

b. Psalm 24:3-4

Who may ascend the mountain of Yahweh?
And who may stand in his holy place?
He who is innocent of hands and pure of heart,
who does not lift up [*nāśā*] his soul to falseness [*shāv*]
and does not swear deceitfully.

c. Jeremiah 5:2

“Although they say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives,’
still they are swearing falsely.”

d. Jeremiah 7:9-11

“Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations?” [**Note:** All these actions are related to prohibitions found in the Decalogue. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that the expression “swear falsely” clarifies our understanding of how the third commandment wants to be understood.]

e. Hosea 4:15

“Though you commit adultery, O Israel,
let not Judah become guilty.
“Do not go to Gilgal;
do not go up to Beth Aven.
And do not swear, ‘As surely as the Lord lives!’”

f. Jeremiah 4:1b-2

“If you put your detestable idols out of my sight
and no longer go astray,
and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
you swear, ‘As surely as the Lord lives,’
then the nations will be blessed by him
and in him they will glory.”

- g. The entire judicial system in the ANE depended upon truthful testimony; there were no lie detectors, DNA samples, videotapes, etc. So it was common to hear expressions such as: “May Marduk / Dagon / Baal / Chemosh strike me dead if I am lying about” If a person were unwilling to swear to something in the name of his god, the judges would assume he was lying.
- h. In a courtroom dispute, where both parties were swearing contradictory assertions in the name of their god, the judges would take both parties to the temple and challenge them to swear in a sacred venue. Because of the austere setting, and a heightened sense of the possibility of divine displeasure and/or retaliation, liars would often lose their nerve and back away from their false testimony. The unwavering party was assumed to be truthful.
- i. Propp has offered an underlying rationale for the third commandment: “The false oath is injurious to society, ultimately undermining our ability to cope with reality, and is banned in all civilizations.” Houtman concurs: “The impression is created [by false swearing]

that Yahweh stands behind what is affirmed, while in reality, such is not the case. So one's fellow citizens are misled and harmed, if not directly, at least indirectly. . . . When the truth is violated and one can no longer depend on fellow citizens, the moral fiber holding society together unravels.”

F. ‘The Punishment of Neferabu’—An Egyptian Parallel

1. Neferabu was an artisan who worked at Deir el-Medina, an ancient Egyptian village that was home to the craftsmen who worked on the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. A small (11” x 15”) limestone stela contains his confession for swearing falsely to the Egyptian god Ptah. It dates to as early as 1320 B.C., remarkably close to the time of the giving of the law at Sinai.
2. The stela is unusual in that it is inscribed on both sides. The front is divided into two registers. On the upper register is Ptah, in his usual mummy form, sitting on a throne in a booth adorned with a garland of flower petals. Before Ptah is a table heaped with bread and plant offerings. At the top are four ears, a pair of raised arms, and two eyes, designed to assure the attention of the god and a successful response to the prayer.
3. The lower register displays an image of the donor kneeling with raised arms, praying to the god. The text of the prayer is inscribed in front of the figure in eight vertical columns. The prayer continues on the back with ten vertical lines of inscriptions.



Figs. 1-2. The Neferabu Stela (The British Museum)

4. Neferabu says: “I am a man who **swore falsely** to Ptah, Lord of Truth, and he caused me to see darkness in the daytime. I shall speak of his powers to those who do not know him and to those who do know him, to small and to great people. Beware of Ptah, Lord of Truth, behold he does not overlook the deed of any person. Refrain from **pronouncing the name of Ptah falsely**. Behold he who **pronounces it falsely**—he shall be cast down. He caused me to be like the dogs of the street, I being under his control; he caused men and gods to stigmatize me like a man who has become an abomination to his lord. Ptah, Lord of Truth, was just toward me when he made an example of me. Be merciful to me, look toward me when you are merciful.”
5. Neferabu apparently did not learn his lesson, as he got himself into trouble later with the goddess Meretseger.

6. **Note:** Egypt has preserved very little legal material in its annals. This phenomenon is likely due to the veneration of the pharaohs as semi-divine. Their words were regarded as sacred decrees, so legal codes were largely unnecessary in Egypt. It is therefore difficult to know if Neferabu had at his disposal a documented stipulation to obey as one of Ptah's subjects, or if he simply speculated as to the cause of his blindness, which he viewed as divine punishment.

G. The Punishment for Violating This Commandment

1. The punishment for breaking the third commandment is unspecified and could therefore take any form of God's choosing. In the book of Jeremiah, for example, severe penalties are handed down to the prophets who speak lies in God's name, including banishment and/or death (Jer 14:14-16, 27:15, 29:21).
2. To "hold guiltless" (*yěnaqqeh*) suggests letting someone get away without an appropriate punishment. The third commandment indicates that this is precisely what Yahweh will not do if his people misuse his name. While such deeds may go undetected by other human beings, and therefore not be actionable in a court of law, God will take it upon himself to see to both the verdict and the sentence. As such, the third commandment "is directed not toward Yahweh's protection, but toward Israel's" (Durham).
3. Nevertheless, God is clearly concerned about how his people use his name (both by life and by lip), for how they use that name contributes to his reputation in the world. God says in Ezekiel 36:19-21, "I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. And wherever they went among the nations **they profaned my holy name**, for it was said of them, 'These are the LORD's people, and yet they had to leave his land.' **I had concern for my holy name**, which the house of Israel **profaned** among the nations where they had gone."
4. Because the third commandment says, "Do not lift up in vain the name of the LORD," many Jews did not take up his name at all. The word "Adonai" ("Lord") was often used in place of "Yahweh" ("LORD"), even during lectionary readings in the synagogue. Fence laws were created to prevent people from speaking (and therefore misusing) God's name altogether. The Talmud, for example, in a discussion about how often a cup of wine should be blessed, states, "Whoever says a blessing which is not necessary transgresses the command of 'thou shalt not take [God's name in vain]!'" (*b. Ber.* 33a).
5. Even today, orthodox Jews will write "G-d" instead of "God" on a paper in order to avoid profaning the sacred name. Should the paper fall to the ground and be stepped on, the name of God would thus be dishonored. (Cf. Matthew's use of "the kingdom of heaven" instead of "the kingdom of God," perhaps reflecting an established tradition by the time of the first century.) But as we have seen, the third commandment involves more than just an offense involving words, whether written or spoken.

H. Reflections on the Third Commandment

1. Durham: "In general terms, this commandment prohibits a lack of seriousness about Yahweh's Presence in Israel, demonstrated through a pointless, misleading, or even false use of his name."
2. Oswalt: "At the heart of this commandment is the call for the covenant partner to do nothing that would portray God as anything less than absolutely holy, to do nothing that would seek to use him for our own ends, to do nothing that would cause the world to see him less than he is."

3. Ibn Ezra: “[To swear] as Yahweh lives (e.g., Jer 4:2) and then to lie would be tantamount to saying, ‘God is dead.’”
4. Goethe: “People treat the name of God as if this inconceivable and ungraspable being were no more than their equal. Otherwise, they would not use ‘Oh God,’ ‘for the love of God,’ ‘good God.’ It becomes an empty phrase for them, a mere name unconnected from any thought. If they had been permeated by its sublimity, then they would be silent; honor would have kept them from mentioning it at all.”
5. Fretheim: “God’s good name is as important to God as any human being’s name is to the person who bears it. A name is a precious thing; the way in which people talk about others—such as gossip or other vain and hurtful talk—will affect their standing in the community. . . . A central concern of God in the book of Exodus to this point has been ‘that my name may be declared throughout all the earth’ (9:16). . . . At the deepest level, use of God’s name is a matter of mission.”
6. Stuart: “[Stated positively, the third commandment instructs believers to] speak God’s name respectfully and honestly.”

II. Insights about God and His Ways from the Text

- A. God prizes both truth and truth telling. He does not want to be associated with—or pulled into—his people’s falsehoods in any way.
- B. God does not want to be misrepresented by those who claim to belong to him. He wants his people to create for him a good reputation in both their local communities and around the world.
- C. God does not want his name or authority to be applied to things that he has not sanctioned.
- D. God treasures his name and does not want it to be used lightly or frivolously.

III. Application of the Theological Insights to Our Context

- A. I must never attach God’s name to something that is fraudulent, vain, empty, or frivolous.
- B. I should be aware at all times that I can drag God’s name through the mud by:
 1. Lying, deceiving, gossiping, or exaggerating as his representative
 2. Teaching error or false doctrine as his representative
 3. Using his name as vain repetition or “filler” in my prayers
 4. Claiming that God has spoken when he really hasn’t
- C. I should be very reluctant—or at least extremely careful—in using phrases like, “God told me . . .” or “God told me to tell you . . .” To say that God has spoken when he really hasn’t is a violation of the third commandment.
- D. **Discuss:** Was Hamilton right? God says in the third commandment, “Either honor my name, both by the way you live and by the way you talk, or else dissociate yourself from my name.”