Carmen Joy Imes

_Bearing YHWH’s Name at Sinai: A Reexamination of the Name Command of the Decalogue_

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In this monograph, which has its origins in Imes’s Wheaton College dissertation, she seeks to understand the name command as it appears in the Decalogue in both Exod 20 and Deut 5: “You shall not bear the name of YHWH, your God, in vain.” While the biblical text is straightforward, Imes observes that its plain meaning has too often been set aside in favor of any number of other interpretations, most of which she identifies as “elliptical.”

On the one hand, elliptical interpretations assume that שְׁנֵשׁ אֶשְׁנ stands for some longer expression in which a significant element is implied rather than stated explicitly (as an ellipsis); these have dominated the history of the interpretation of the name command. Nonelliptical interpretations, on the other hand, make up a minority view of those who claim that שְׁנֵשׁ אֶשְׁנ is a “complete expression” in its own right. Imes’s goal is to take up and advance a nonelliptical interpretation that she refers to as “representational,” since it understands the name command as “prohibiting the misrepresentation of YHWH by those who bear his name.” (3) Ultimately, she argues that “to bear the name” (שְׁנֵשׁ אֶשְׁנ) in the name command has an important “visual lexicon or model” in the role of the high priest in not only bearing the names of the twelve tribes on his person before God but also in bearing the name of God before the Israelite assembly.
Imes examines fully both elliptical and nonelliptical interpretations of the name command, arguing that the latter—the minority view in the history of interpretation—is superior and to be preferred to the former. She proposes that, “while the representational interpretation is not the only possible reading, it offers a more satisfying explanation of the data than other interpretations.” (3) Her study makes use of lexical, historical, literary, and “conceptual metaphorical” (and theological) methods and rightly acknowledges that her argument is cumulative in nature. The weight of the evidence presented throughout the study, taken altogether, is necessary to support her position on the representational interpretation of the name command. In the end, she argues for the theological and ethical significance of the representational view of the name command in which the name command is not limited to speech but encompasses a concern for ancient Israel’s faithful obedience as YHWH’s covenant partner, bearing YHWH’s name before the nations.

After a short introduction, in chapter 2 Imes undertakes a thorough survey of the more than twenty ways in which the name command has been understood through the centuries and by interpreters representing a variety of religious orientations from across the globe. While most opt for the elliptical perspective on שָׁשׂ אֶשֶׁת, there is no agreement about what is left out. Leading suggestions include “the hand,” as in “You shall not lift your hand to the name of YHWH in vain”; and “to your lips,” as in, “You shall not lift up the name of YHWH to your lips in vain.” The main idea in such interpretations is that the name of YHWH ought not be used in swearing false oaths. Indeed, many explanations of the name command center on right or wrong speech. Others have proposed that the implied “to your lips” relates to mispronouncing the proper name of God, though such a prohibition is likely a later Jewish concern and does not fit well in the literary-historical context of the Sinai tradition. Similarly, there is no consensus about how to understand the enigmatic אושׁל, “in vain, empty.” So others favor the name command as an injunction against false or illicit teaching, magic (prominent during the Reformation period), idolatry, “empty handed worship,” and “hypocritical worship.” Here the command concerns not only speech but behavior. Finally, Imes considers שָׁשׂ אֶשֶׁת as a nonelliptical expression and ultimately develops the position of Allan Harman (1988), for whom the analogue of the high priest’s breastplate in Exod 28 is crucial. Just as the high priest “‘bears the names’ of the twelve tribes on his person and so represents them before YHWH, so Israel bears the divine name.” (45) Israel’s task, then, is in its life to represent YHWH well (not אושׁל) before the nations.

Chapter 3 carries out a thorough and careful examination of the key terms in the name command, including שָׁשׂ both in its independent use and as part of idiomatic expressions, as well as אָשֶׁר, אָשֶׁת, and חָפֵץ (acquit). She looks not only at the occurrences of the main (and related) words, phrases, and syntax of the name command elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible but also in early translations and cognate literature. The work here is quite
remarkable. Important for Imes’s thesis is the relationship between סְמָשׁ and ideas of branding or possession. She concludes that the linguistic data support her view that the name command is at home in the context of language of (legal) claims of ownership (e.g., Jer 7:9–12).

In “A Reexamination of the Name Command in the Context of the Decalogue,” Imes analyzes the wider literary context of the Decalogue (Exodus–Deuteronomy). She begins by clarifying that the Decalogue is not comparable to the civil legislation or legal statutes familiar to modern readers. Few sanctions are given, and most of their number are too vague to have been enforced in ancient Israelite society. Rather, the Decalogue’s function was to provide a worldview or guidance for daily living. As a worldview, the Decalogue determined the parameters within which ancient Israelites could pursue righteous living as God’s covenant people, with opportunity for success, failure, and divine mercy. As guidance, the Decalogue—embedded in a larger narrative—provided direction for Israel’s life and worship. This wide literary context shows that such guidance was intended as part of a larger ancient covenant document for a particular community in a specific historical situation (the exodus generation, at Sinai, and the later generation on the plains of Moab). This chapter also attends to the Decalogue as the immediate literary context for the name command. Imes argues that the name command properly follows the first command about the exclusive worship of YHWH: “These two, regarding proper worship and proper representation, stand at the head of the covenant stipulations. The God who forbids making images points to his people as his legitimate representatives, a role they are not to take lightly.” (134) Altogether, “these words painted a portrait of YHWH’s covenant-keeping people, who were to worship YHWH alone and represent him before the nations by ordering their lives and relationships in accordance with his divine will” (139).

This theme of representation provides a fitting segue to the final chapter, “Bearing YHWH’s Name at Sinai.” This is by far the most creative, constructive, and important chapter of the book. Here Imes examines the “metaphoricity” of the name command, utilizing the notion of conceptual metaphor, which she defines as “an analogical word-picture that exists as a feature of thought, shaping how reality is perceived and, consequently, expressed in a variety of ways.” (140) In the name command, סְמָשׁ stands for the divine claim of ownership, and “bearing” (אָשָׂנְכָה) indicates an obedient forward movement. She concludes that the meaning of Israel’s “bearing YHWH’s name” is associated via a word-picture with the role, ceremonial dress, and ritual function of the high priest. Set apart by ordination, the high priest bore the name of God on his person, engraved in gold on the headpiece he wore. As the high priest represented God to the people (and the people before God), so Israel is to represent God before the nations: rescued by God from Egypt and brought into a covenant with YHWH, over whom YHWH’s name had been proclaimed marking YHWH’s ownership (branding) and set
apart by divine election, Israel is henceforth to represent YHWH before the nations in lives of obedience to YHWH in ways that the honor, praise, and preserve the reputation of YHWH in the world. To do anything less would be to “bear the name of YHWH, your God, in vain.” Her conclusion further points to the continuing significance of a nonelliptical understanding of the name command for the lives of God’s people today.

Chapters begin with clear introductions and conclude with helpful summative paragraphs. Imes includes texts in Hebrew and extrabiblical texts in transliteration, together with her own translations for all passages. Useful tables and/or figures (and even drawings of priestly garments by the author) appear throughout the book.

Many will benefit from Imes’s judicious work here, especially those with interests in the Decalogue and in the character and role of ancient Israel in its world. Contemporary religious leaders may find the final chapter especially meaningful for their work. In the end, many will find reward in their patient reading of this book and, whether persuaded or not, will nevertheless agree that Imes has put forward a compelling case for a nonelliptical or representational understanding of the name command.