

The Prohibition Against the Sacred Name

In the time of the messiah it was prohibited by Jewish law (based upon Rabbinical interpretation and not scriptural precedent) for all the עַם הָאָרֶץ (*am ha-erets*; people of the land), except for the high priest and a chosen few, to pronounce or use the sacred name; and even these men were permitted its utterance only under special circumstances.¹ Transgression of this Jewish law was punishable by death. This historical fact and its ramifications upon statements made in the New Testament have gone almost totally unnoticed by Christian theologians. The failure to consider the consequences of Jewish traditions and laws as they relate to and often oppose the teachings of the messiah and his disciples—as well as the events that subsequently transpired—has left an important missing dimension in Christian understanding of the New Testament. To clarify this problem, so that the doctrine of the messiah and his disciples with regard to the sacred name can be fully comprehended, we must now discuss some of the evidence of this legal prohibition.

Background

Archaeological evidence, as well as historical records, testify that from the time that the Israelites were first banded together as a nation at the Exodus in 1439 B.C.E. until a small group of their Judahite branch was permitted to return to Judaea from their Babylonian captivity in the late sixth and mid-fifth century B.C.E., the Israelites commonly spoke and wrote the sacred name Yahweh.² Referring to this evidence, the noted historian William Foxworth Albright comments:³

In essentials, however, orthodox Yahwehism remained the same from Moses to Ezra.

The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* similarly concludes:⁴

At least until the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. this name [Yahweh] was regularly pronounced with its proper vowels, as is clear from the Lachish Letters, written shortly before that date.

¹ Also see Vol. II.

² See Vol. II, Chaps. II and III.

³ ARI, p. 175.

⁴ EJ, 7, p. 680.

The sacred name was commonplace in Judaea and Galilee up until the second century B.C.E. The pivotal point came in the reign of the Seleucid king named Antiochus Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.E.), who was a member of the Greek ruling house that governed the Syrian empire, an empire that included Galilee and Judaea. In his time there arose in Judaea a small but vocal group of influential citizens who held strong leanings towards the Greek culture. The Hellenistic party at Jerusalem found consideration for their view in the likes of the high priests named Onias III, Jason, and Menelaus. Their limited attempts to Hellenize Judaea and Galilee were followed by a massive attempt to do so by King Epiphanes himself, an event which took place in 167 B.C.E.⁵ The Jews were compelled, under the penalty of death, “to depart from the laws of their fathers, and to cease living by the laws of *eloahim*. Further, the sanctuary in Jerusalem was to be polluted and called Zeus Olympius (named after the chief Greek god).”⁶

The attempt at forced Hellenization by Epiphanes and the liberal Jews was met with a strong backlash. The subsequent revolt by the people of Judaea and Galilee brought to power the Maccabean (Hasmonaean) priest-kings, a line that survived from 167 to 37 B.C.E. The tumult that accompanied this revolt also brought into existence the three leading religious parties: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.⁷ With the demise of the old Zadok line of

⁵ 1 Macc., 1:1–64; 2 Macc., 4:7–8:36; 4 Macc., 4:15–18:24; Jos., *Antiq.*, 12:5:1–12:6:2, 15:3:1, *Wars*, 1:1:1–4, 5:9:4 (394). For the evidence that the sacred name was in common usage until 167 B.C.E. see Vol. II.

⁶ 2 Macc., 6:1–2.

⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:5:8–9, states that in the year that the Jewish high priest named Jonathan made an alliance with Rome and the Spartans, there existed in Judaea the three major Jewish schools: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. 1 Macc., 15:16–29, and B. A. Zar., 8b–9a, date this alliance to about 140 B.C.E. Josephus’s statement gives the earliest known date whereby any of these three groups existed. Coming as it does not long after the Maccabean revolt (167 B.C.E), it is certain that all three groups emerged as a result of that uprising and in opposition to the religious suppression of the Seleucid Greeks of Syria. The EJ observes that the sect of the Pharisees “emerged as a distinct group shortly after the Hasmonaean revolt” and were apparently a branch of the Hasidim, “an early Jewish sect which promoted the observance of Jewish ritual and the study of the Torah” (EJ, 13, pp. 363f; 1 Macc., 2:42). Likewise, the Essenes make their first appearance at “the end of the Hasmonaean revolt” (EJ, 6, p. 899).

The last group, the Sadducees, also must have come into existence at the end of the Hasmonaean revolt because they were created as an opposition to the more radical “traditions” of the Pharisees. The Sadducees represented a class of wealthy aristocrats, merchants, and priests who adhered to a much more conservative stance, holding that only interpretations based directly upon what the Scriptures said could be used as real authority. This view was in sharp contrast with the Pharisees who gave credence to an “Oral Law,” supposedly given to Moses and the Israelites along with the “Written Law” at Mount Sinai (a view which has no validity whatsoever). The evidence shows that the Sadducees had been created as a counter force to what they perceived as the excesses of the Pharisees and the unfounded notion of an inspired “Oral Law” based upon the “traditions” of the fathers (traditions which were later manifested in written form as the *Talmud* and *Midrash*) (see Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:10:6; and see the comments in CBL, 2, pp. 663ff). Nevertheless, the Sadducees were bound by their own dogmas and interpretations which prevented them from understanding many scriptural doctrines (e.g. they did not believe in the resurrection).

S. Zeitlin (JQR, 59, pp. 255–267), meanwhile, contends that the Pharisees were formed in the fourth century B.C.E. and named by the Sadducees (Zadokites; i.e. supporters of the Zadok priesthood). The Pharisees, he argues, were called Perushim; i.e. separatists, by the Sadducees because they were believed to have held heretical views and had separated themselves from the

priests, the rise in power of the scribes and religious political parties, and the absence of prophets, new religious thought began to gain dominance in the land. The heart of this new approach was a reliance upon the “traditions of the fathers” as a guiding force for scriptural interpretation.

The rabbis and scribes, dominated by the Pharisee sect, were appalled by the religious persecution of law-loving Jews, both by foreigners and liberal Jews alike. Sabbath-keeping and the practice of circumcision had been forbidden under the pain of death; law-keeping Jews were subjected to every degradation and brutality imaginable; and pagan sacrifices and prostitution were established in the holy temple at Jerusalem.⁸ The reign of terror under Antiochus also brought with it the vile abuse and the prohibition against the sacred name as part of his program of forced Hellenization.⁹ In the eyes of the rabbis, everything possible had to be done to avoid such horrible blasphemy from ever occurring again. It was time to build “a fence around the Torah (Law).”¹⁰

Speaking of this transition period, a passage in the Yerusalemi Yoma states:¹¹

In former times the name (Yahweh) was taught to all;
but when immorality increased it was reserved for
the pious.

The Midrash on Psalms adds:¹²

R. Abba bar Kahana taught that two generations
made use of the Ineffable Name: the men of the Great
Synagogue, and the generation under [Hadrian’s]
persecution.

The Great Synagogue period ended shortly before the conquest of Jerusalem by Antiochus IV in 167 B.C.E.¹³ The reference to Hadrian’s persecution directs us towards the Bar Kochba revolt (132–135 C.E.), which saw a

Judaeen people and the *eloahim* of Israel. First, it is questionable that the Pharisees would have continued under a name applied to them by an opposing party. Second, the Talmudic verses cited to support an earlier date for these parties are questionable—the rabbis never having a sound chronology for this early period and often anachronistically placed events. It seems far more probable that the Sadducees arose as a political party bent upon restoring the Zadok line, which had fallen in 171 B.C.E., and that the Pharisees called themselves separatists because they believed that through their stringent adherence to their religious rituals they could separate themselves from the unfaithful Jews as well as from the rest of pagan mankind.

⁸ See above n. 5.

⁹ See Meg. Taan.; B. R.Sh., 18b; JE, 9, p. 164; EJ, 7, p. 683. The very fact that the Greek rulers of Syria forbade the Jews from using the sacred name in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes demonstrates that the Jews were, in fact, using it at that time. The prohibition against its use by the Jewish religious leaders themselves came about as a reaction to heathen misuse.

¹⁰ Aboth, 1:1. TNTB, p. 140, comments that the rabbinical phrase, “make a fence around the Law,” meant to, “Make additional commandments in order to safeguard the original commandments; for example, certain acts should be avoided towards the approach of evening on Friday lest one should forget and inadvertently continue to do them on the Sabbath.”

¹¹ J. Yoma, 40d.

¹² Mid. Teh., Ps., 36:8.

¹³ The Mishnah tells us that Simeon the Just “was of the remnants of the Great Synagogue” (Aboth, 1:2). The high priest named Simeon lived around 198 B.C.E. (Ecclus., 50:1; Danby, *Mishnah*, p. 446, n. 6). Also see below n. 23.

resurgence of previous Jewish customs.¹⁴ Use of the sacred name temporarily found public use again, at least among some of the priests. Except for the intervening period of the Bar Kochba revolt, the sacred name has been suppressed by the Jewish religious leaders until this day.

The Jewish religious leaders pressed forward with an ultra-pious interpretation of Leviticus, 24:16—which commanded that anyone, whether Israelite or alien, who had blasphemed (did violence to) the name יהוה, should be stoned to death—and a misunderstanding of Exodus, 20:7, and Deuteronomy, 5:11, which commanded that no one was to carry the name of יהוה to worthlessness.¹⁵ These passages were now understood to mean that it was profane even to utter the sacred name.¹⁶ Only the very pious were permitted limited use of the name, and the practice quickly degenerated into a superstition.¹⁷ Its assumption was that all men were evil, and as the *Midrash Tehillim* concludes, the world was not worthy enough to pronounce the “whole name.”¹⁸

Prohibition in the First Century C.E.

By the first century C.E. the prohibition against any common man pronouncing the sacred name was well-established as a law of the Jews. The notion is first reflected in the work of Ben Sira (writing in the latter part of the second century B.C.E.).¹⁹ He states, “He who continually swears and names (Yahweh)

¹⁴ Not only did the sacred name make a temporary re-emergence but so did the palaeo-Hebrew letters (see Vol. II, Chaps., II and III). Also see the discussion on the Bar Kochba revolt in the last chapters of our forthcoming work entitled, *The Sabbath and Jubilee Cycle*.

¹⁵ JE, 9, p. 161; EJ, 7, p. 680; also see our discussion above pp. 37–39.

¹⁶ PCBE, 2, p. 914, notes that the Jewish prohibition “was founded upon an erroneous rendering of Lev. xxiv:16, from which it was inferred that the mere utterance of the name constituted a capital offense.” NSBD, p. 606, states, “As time went on, the sacredness of the name Jehovah (*Yahweh*) was increasingly emphasized until at last it was considered profanation to pronounce it even in religious exercises. This avoidance of the name had probably become common usage in NT times.”

¹⁷ B. Kidd., 71a, “When unruly men increased, it was confided to the pious of the priesthood, and these ‘swallowed it’ during the chanting of their brother priests.” H. Freedman footnotes this verse with the comment that the “Tetragrammaton” was being swallowed at the benediction (*Kidd.*, n. 12). This verse in the Kiddushin continues by saying, “It was taught: Rabbi Tarfon said: ‘I once ascended the dais (place where the priest stood when pronouncing the blessing) after my mother’s brother, and inclined my ear to the High Priest, and heard him swallowing the Name during the chanting of his brother priests.’” JE, 9, p. 163, notes, “It appears that a majority of the priests in the last days of the Temple were unworthy to pronounce the Name, and a combination of the letters or of the equivalents of the letters constituting the Name was employed by the priests in the Temple. Thus the Twelve-Lettered Name [יהוה אלהי אדוני (*adonai Yahweh eloahi*)] was substituted, which, a baraita says, was first taught to every priest; but with the increase of the number of licentious priests the Name was revealed only to the pious ones, who ‘swallowed’ its pronunciation while the other priests were chanting.” Also see EJ, 7, p. 68.

¹⁸ Mid. Teh., Ps., 113:3. Also see below n. 34.

¹⁹ The Prologue to Ecclesiasticus notes that Yahushua ben Sirach’s grandson found this book in the 38th year of that family coming into Egypt and during the reign of Euergetes (Ptolemy VII Euergetes, ruled 145–117 B.C.E.). This information strongly indicates that Yahushua ben Sirach and his family left Judaea during the period of forced Hellenization under the Greek Syrian king Epiphanes in about 167 B.C.E. Yahushua ben Sirach, therefore, probably wrote his text after he arrived in Egypt and after the renaissance in the study of the Torah took place when the Maccabees came to power. A date near 160 B.C.E. would not be too far off the mark. The translation from Hebrew into Greek by his grandson, accordingly, took place thirty-eight years after that family arrived in Egypt (i.e. about 130 B.C.E.).

is not cleansed from his sins."²⁰ The first century Jewish writer, Philo, who composed his works between about 35–45 C.E., for example, expresses this legal requirement when he tells us, "But if anyone, I will not say blasphemes the lord of deities and men, but even ventures to utter his name unseasonably, let him suffer the penalty of death."²¹ In another place, while discussing the sacred name as it was written upon the crown of the high priest, Philo remarks that it is "a name which only those whose ears and tongues are purified may hear or speak in the holy place (Temple), and no other person, nor in any other place at all."²²

In an anachronistic story, Pseudo-Callisthenes (first century C.E.) speaks of the ploughing under of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, which actually took place about 110 B.C.E. In this story, which is pushed back to the time of Alexander the Great,²³ the Jewish high priest is reported to have told Alexander:²⁴

We serve one *eloahim* who created heaven and earth
and all things in them. But no man is able to tell
his name.

Josephus, a contemporary of Philo and Pseudo-Callisthenes, in a discussion of the sacred name, likewise tells us that it was "unlawful" in his day for him to speak it.²⁵ In his discussion of the Ten Commandments, Josephus would not even write the commandments down but instead resorted to paraphrasing. He justified his action by telling his readers:²⁶

These words it is not permitted us to state explicitly,
to the letter, but we will indicate their purport.

Josephus could not record them "to the letter" because he was forbidden even to write the sacred name, his being an historical work and not specifically a manuscript for Biblical study by the few "pious" ones.²⁷

From the period before the fall of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 C.E., we also possess evidence from the Qumran scrolls. *The Manual of Discipline*, for

²⁰ Ecclus., 23:10; and see comments on the translation in GJP, p. 34.

²¹ Philo, *Moses*, 2:38 (206).

²² *Ibid.*, 2:23 (114). That there is no doubt as to what name he is referring, cf. Exod., 28:36, and the fact that Philo continues by describing this name as having "four letters," Philo, 2:23 (115).

²³ Marcus, *Jos.*, VI, app. C, pp. 513–532. Also see the B. Yoma 69a and Leviticus Rabbah, 13. G. A. Foot Moore offers a possible solution to the problem of this anachronism in the story about Simeon the Just and Alexander. He points out that the Greek king to whom Simeon went out to make peace was "most likely Antiochus III" (JFCC, 1, p. 35). M. Reisel writes, "the Seleucid dynasty was later hated by the Jews. The glorification of the Seleucid Antiochus III, who had shown himself a friend of Judea, was apparently generalized without attaching it to a specific name, so that it could be transferred to his great predecessor Alexander the Great" (MNY, p. 65). This story may also have applied to the Hasmonaean high priest named Simeon (147–135 B.C.E.).

²⁴ Ps.-Cal., 2:24.

²⁵ *Jos., Antiq.*, 2:12:4. Josephus uses the Greek expression *θεμιτὸν*, which means "allowed by the laws of God and men, righteous" (GEL, p. 361). Therefore, Josephus was forbidden by the Jewish religious and state laws from uttering the sacred name.

²⁶ *Jos., Antiq.*, 3:5:4.

²⁷ For the prohibition on writing the sacred name see Vol. II.

example, ordered that, “Any man who mentions anything by the Name which is honored above all shall be set apart.”²⁸ Proof of the legal prohibition is likewise found in the Mishnah, which is a compilation of the Jewish oral laws built upon the traditions of their fathers. These oral laws were in full force during the first century prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. In this book we find that a blasphemer was not culpable of a death sentence unless “he exactly pronounces the name (Yahweh).”²⁹ It also reports that, “in the Temple they pronounced the name as it is written, but in the provinces with a substituted word.”³⁰

The *Yoma* in the Mishnah and commentaries on it state that, “One does not pronounce the ineffable name outside (the limits of the Temple),” and that on the Day of Atonement, “Ten times did the high priest pronounce the name” within the Temple.³¹ In the last days of the Temple, the High Priest limited his utterance of the divine name to a mere whisper.³²

The ineffable name doctrine continued among the Jews during the following centuries. Rabbi Abba Saul, who lived in the second century C.E., tells us that among those who have no share in the world to come, “he that pronounces the name with its proper letters.”³³ The *Kiddushin* reports that among those who are especially prepared by the Sages to receive this high knowledge, the pronunciation of the divine “name of four letters” was confided “to their disciples once a septennate—others state, twice a septennate (seven year period).” It adds that this revelation was to be kept a secret.³⁴ The Babylonian Talmud, in the *Berakoth*,³⁵ states, “he who pronounces a benediction when it is not required transgresses the commandment: ‘Do not invoke

²⁸ Man. of Disc., 6:27; DSS, p. 380. Géza Vermès’ translation of this passage reads, “[He who] swears by the Name of the Honored One that is above all honored ones.” In his footnote to this verse Vermès states, “It was absolutely forbidden to pronounce the ineffable Name (YHWH). The brethren even refrained from writing it” (DJD, p. 145).

²⁹ Sanh., 7:5. Also see JBL, 24, pp. 147, 149, 159-162, which demonstrates that the Hebrew words used in this passage mean that the accused had to “exactly” pronounce the name Yahweh to be guilty.

³⁰ Sotah, 7:6; Tamid, 7:2.

³¹ Yoma, 3:8, 4:1-2, 6:1-2, 8:9; J. Yoma, 40a, 67; B. Yoma 39b; Tosef., Yoma, 2:2. For a full treatment of this subject see JE, 9, pp. 162-165.

³² Originally, when the high priest “pronounced the (sacred) name, his voice was heard even to Jericho” (B. Yoma, 39b). Yet later, when the restraints against the sacred name were increased, the high priest was reduced to muffling (swallowing) or whispering the sacred name (see above n. 17). On the sound made when the priest muffled the sacred name see TS, pp. 127f, 736, n. 25.

³³ Sanh., 10:1. Also see B. Sanh., 90a; B. A.Zar., 18a; and see Mid. Teh., Ps., 87:5.

³⁴ Kidd., 71a. Also see MNY, pp. 68, 118f, ns. 367, 368. As E. Urbach (TS, p. 132; cf. Mid. Teh., 91:8) notes:

Those Sages who knew the secret of the Ineffable Name regarded its concealment from the general public as a punishment. Thus R. Joshua b. Levi in the name of R. Phinehas b. Jair replied to the question: Why are the Jews not answered when they pray? “Because they do not know the secret of the Ineffable Name.”

³⁵ B. Ber., 33a, at the bottom.

the name of יהוה.³⁶ In the Pesahim we read that, “[In] this world [the sacred name] is written with יה and read as יהו; but in the future world it shall be one: it shall be written with יה and read יה.” It also adds that the name is “to be hidden.”³⁷

Conclusion

Though the subject about the substitution of the sacred name will be dealt with in more depth later on in our study, these above citations are more than adequate to show that, during the first century C.E., the Jews of Judaea and Galilee were under a legal prohibition—outside of the High Priest and certain ones declared pious who could know but only use it secretly in the Temple—against anyone pronouncing the sacred name. Outside the Temple only a substitute word, such as *adonai* (my sovereign), *el* and *eloahim*, were considered permissible. If anyone outside of the few chosen used the sacred name they were branded “blasphemers” and were subject to the death penalty. Into this Hebrew-Aramaic speaking land of Judaea-Galilee, the country of the original Scriptures, where the sacred name had become outlawed for all except those few chosen by the religious hierarchy, walked Yahushua the messiah, his apostles, and his other early disciples. With this backdrop we can now consider the proper context of Yahushua’s words as well as those of his early followers.

³⁶ Citing Exod., 20:7.

³⁷ B. Pes., 50a.

