

# On Swearing

By Thomas Schirmacher

## 1. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:33-37) and James 5:12

Most theologians agree about the expectations Jesus intends in concrete examples in the Sermon on the Mount, but not on His attitude towards Old Testament law. Do His commandments confirm Old Testament law or change it? All concur that He condemns adultery in the heart, for example, but did the Old Testament do so, as well?

By providing a criterion for Jesus' attitude towards Old Testament law, the issue of swearing oaths demonstrates how His instructions are to be understood and applied today. Did He confirm its commandments or alter them? In modifying the Law's rules on this issue, He would have abolished the Old Testament's closely defined usage of oaths.

Few Christians who prohibit swearing practice accordingly. Otherwise, no believer could serve as a government official or representative or could give evidence in a court of law. Why should we allow ourselves to make an exception in this matter? Why should state affairs be different?

If we assume that Jesus is contrasting Old Testament Law with the Pharisees' and scribes' use of oaths, then we discover that the oaths themselves are not the problem, but only those oaths already forbidden in the Old Testament.<sup>87</sup> The Old Testament permitted only and solely oaths made in God's name. Moses had commanded, "You shall fear the Lord your God ... and shall take oaths in His name" (Dt. 6:13, 10:20). At the same time, this was a command to make oaths. This is even clearer in Psalm 76:12: "Make vows to the Lord your God, and pay them," or in Psalm 63:12, "Everyone who swears by Him shall glory." Is this no longer valid for New Testament believers?

A "vow"<sup>88</sup> is a voluntary oath (Dt. 23:23) which was not required, although God preferred it. Once made, however, an oath must be kept (Dt. 23:22-24; Ec. 5:4-5). There were obligatory oaths, as well. Vowing ("binding oneself") was a kind of "swearing" or "oathmaking" (synonymous expressions), for Psalm 132:2 and Numbers 30:3, 14 use the term as a parallelism for oaths and swear-

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ing (see Gn. 28:20-22; Num. 21:2; Jdg. 11:30 ff.; 1 Sa. 1:11, 14:24; Jon. 1:16, 2:9, 2:20; Acts 18:18, 21:23, 23:12ff.).

In Jesus' day, however, people swore by everything imaginable and qualified the validity and earnestness of the vow by the thing sworn by. Jürgen Kuberski sums up the errors in Jewish-Pharisaical practice as following:

1. The Pharisees differentiated between oaths which had to be kept and those which did not, a distinction unknown in the Old Testament.
2. They avoided using God's name, although the Old Testament required it.
3. They employed substitutes, which, according to Jesus, made no difference: an oath must be kept, whether God's name is mentioned explicitly or not.<sup>89</sup>

When the oath has to do with persons or things other than God, Matthew 5:34-35 should be translated, "You should not swear by Heaven at all ... or by the earth ...." James 5:12 would then mean, "Do not swear by heaven nor by earth ...."<sup>90</sup> The complete text of Matthew 5:34-37 would be, "I tell you, however, you should not swear by heaven at all, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King; nor should you swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Your words should be Yes, yes! or No, no! Anything else is from the Evil One." James 5:12 reads, "Above all, brothers, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath (or with an oath by anything else). Let your yes be yes and your no be no, so that you not come under judgement."

The parallel in Matthew 23:16-22 expresses this idea more clearly: "Alas, you blind leaders, who say: if someone swears by the temple, it is not binding, but if he swears by the gold in the temple, it is. Fools and blind men! What is greater, the gold or the temple which makes the gold holy? And, if someone swears by the altar, it is not binding, but if he swears by the offering which lies on the altar, it is. Blind men! What is greater, the offering or the altar, which makes the offering holy? If a person swears by the altar, he swears by it and by everything lying on it. Whoever swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him Who lives there. And when someone swears by Heaven, he swears by the throne of God and by Him Who sits upon it." Jesus does not object to oaths themselves, but criticizes those which were made on things other than God and whose obligatory force was classified according to the things sworn by.

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An oath must always be made by something higher than oneself, God being the only exception. He swears by Himself, because “there is no one greater to swear to” (Heb. 6:13). Because every oath automatically recognizes the one sworn by as Lord and as superior authority, God forbids swearing by other gods and takes all oaths seriously, even those not made in His Name. He either considers the oath maker bound or, should the oath require evil, punishes the person especially for not only desiring, but also vowing to do evil.

German law permits the leaders of the State to decide for themselves whether they want to make their oath of office with or without a religious affirmation (Grundgesetz § 56 and 64). From a Christian point of view, however, an oath which refers to no higher authority is unthinkable. Helmut Thielicke has demonstrated that an atheist cannot make any oath at all, since an oath made without calling on God’s Name has no validity.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless God will judge politicians by their oaths.

Jesus pointed out that the Pharisee’s oaths must always reflect the truth; that their statements must always be “Yes, yes! No, no!” (Mt. 5:37), which James renders, “Let your Yes be yes, your No be no!” (Jas. 5:12). If God requires the truth for everyday speech, how much more must oaths be truthful!

As a matter of fact, the words “Yes, yes!” (Gr. *Nai, nai!*) and “No, no!” (Gr. *Ou, ou*) may themselves be oath formulas. The Greek term “Nai, nai” may be the translation of the Hebrew “Amen,” in Revelation 1:6 and 22:20,<sup>92</sup> for example, where “Nai” (New King James: “Even so”) is parallel to “Amen.” In 2 Corinthians 1:17, “that with me there should be Yes, Yes and No, No” (NKJV). Paul uses the same phrase as in 2 Corinthians 1:20,<sup>93</sup> where the expression indicates the unequivocal fulfillment of God’s promises in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:17-22; compare the mention of the sealing in verse 22). In Matthew 5:18, Jesus used the expression “Verily, verily” or “Amen, amen” which are oath formulas. Assuming that “Yes, yes” and “No, no” were indeed oath formula, their usage here confirms our proposition. Jesus then forbids us to swear by things and substitutes a simple oath with “Yes, yes” and “No, no” without ulterior motives or restrictions.

Luke T. Johnson and Walter C. Kaiser have ascertained that James’ epistle is primarily an exposition on Leviticus 19:12-18 and

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may include a sermon on this text. A comparison of the two texts shows that James 5:12 refers to Leviticus 19:12, the Old Testament commandment against swearing falsely, but not against swearing at all. James does not alter the Old Testament Law, he applies it.

<b>Parallels between Leviticus 19 and James</b>	
<b>Leviticus</b>	<b>James</b>
19:12: "You shall not swear by My name falsely ..."	5:12: "... do not swear..."
19:13: "You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning."	5:4: "Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth."
19:15: "You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor."	2:1: "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." 2:9: "But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors."
19:16: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people."	4:11: "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law."
19:17: "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him."	5:19-20: "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way, will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins."
19:18: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people."	5:9: "Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned."
19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."	2:8: "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well."

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Jesus' use of the Old Testament to contradict the scribes can also be seen in the quotations in His evaluation of the things sworn by. In verse 34, He quotes Isaiah 66:1: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool." Verse 35 recalls Psalm 48:2, which describes Mount Zion as the "City of the great King."

Note that few of the interpreters who believe that Jesus prohibits swearing altogether are willing to apply the restriction to all cases. Walter Künneth, for example, considers the Sermon on the Mount an "indication that a completely new pneumatic situation has begun for those who are determined to follow Him,"<sup>94</sup> but considers the political oath indispensable. Adolf Schlatter believes that Matthew 5:33-37 forbids swearing but allows a return to the Old Testament position under critical circumstances.<sup>95</sup> Arthur Volkman rejects New Testament oaths altogether, but tells government officials who are to be sworn in, "it would be a misunderstanding of Jesus' purpose to feel oneself bound to a new law."<sup>96</sup> Is Jesus forbidding swearing or not? If there is no restriction for government officials, why then for others? Why shouldn't the individual take an oath under certain circumstances?

Volkman has great difficulties in proving that the New Testament contains no oaths. On Jesus' response to the Council, he writes, "Jesus answers with a simple 'As you have said,' which confesses and confirms but does not swear."<sup>97</sup> The fact is, however, that Jesus is under oath and employs the usual formula in His reply. In reference to Paul, although he admits that, "Paul uses expressions similar to oaths," Volkman insists that the apostle is not actually swearing, but merely underscoring his statement for pastoral purposes.<sup>98</sup> Are there "non-actual" oaths? And what evidence have we for the idea that an oath made for pastoral purposes is no longer an oath?

Ashley Montagu, who has studied swearing in many cultures in the world, believes that the practice, which is common to Western society, reflects a strong Old Testament influence.<sup>99</sup> Christian cultures were responsible for bringing the Old Testament concept of the oath to the rest of the world.

In his discussion of the Sermon on the Mount, August Dächsel concludes that, "...the Law and the One Who fulfilled it (Mt. 5:33 ff.) forbid only perjury and thoughtless, vain oaths."<sup>100</sup> Ernst Luthardt comes to a similar conclusion, that the early Church mis-

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understood the Sermon on the Mount when it interpreted Christ's Words to intend an absolute, although restricted prohibition of oaths, even in the legal regulation of civil life.<sup>101</sup>

Even Martin Luther taught that Jesus had not forbidden swearing,<sup>102</sup> and, prevailed against the Anabaptists, who rejected not only oath taking but any other religious activity undertaken for the state. In his comments on Deuteronomy 6:13 ("You shall take oaths in His name."), Luther writes:

*There are two things to be observed. First, that Christ prohibits swearing completely in Matthew 5:34; here God commands it. But we have said elsewhere that the use of oaths is twofold; one by which we swear lightly without cause; Christ forbids this usage entirely; the other, when we swear out of faith and love for the glory of God, the well-being of our neighbor or for confirmation of the truth.*<sup>103</sup>

Luther never admits any possibility of any sort of contradiction between Jesus and the Old Testament, but refers to Matthew 23:16, 22 and explains in detail the extent to which an oath can serve God.<sup>104</sup>

Not only Luther, but other Protestant theologians of the Reformation expressed similar ideas about oaths. Article XXIX of the Anglican Church's *Common Book of Prayer*, 1549, says:

*As we confess that vain and rash Swearing is forbidden Christian men by our Lord Jesus Christ, and James his Apostle, so we judge that the Christian Religion doth not prohibit, but that a man may swear when the magistrate requireth in a cause of faith and charity, so it be done according to the Prophet's teaching in justice, judgment and truth.*<sup>105</sup>

Article 22.1-7 of the *Westminster Confession*, 1647, concludes:

*A lawful oath is a part of religious worship (Deut. 10:20), wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth or promiseth; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth (Exod. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; 2 Cor. 1:23; 2 Chron. 6:22, 23).*

*The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence (Deut. 6:13); therefore, to swear vainly or rashly by that glorious and*

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*dreadful name, or to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred (Exod. 20:7; Jer. 5:7; Matt. 5:34, 37; James 5:12). Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament as well as under the Old (Heb. 6:16; 2 Cor. 1:23; Isa. 65:16); so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken (1 Kings 8:31; Neh. 13:25; Ezra 10:5).*

*Whosoever taketh an oath, ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he fully persuaded is the truth (Exod. 20:7; Jer. 4:2). Neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform (Gen. 24:2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9). Yet it is a sin to refuse an oath touching anything that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority (Numb. 5:19, 21; Neh. 5:12; Exod. 22:7, 8, 9, 10, 11).*

*An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation (Jer. 4:2; Ps. 24:4). It cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt (1 Sam. 25:22, 32, 33, 34; Ps. 15:4); nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics or infidels (Ezek. 17:16, 18, 19; Josh. 9:18, 19; 2 Sam. 21:1).*

*A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness. (Isa. 19:21; Eccl. 5:4, 5, 6; Ps. 61:8; Ps. 66:13, 14)*

*It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone (Ps. 76:11; Jer. 44:25, 26): and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want; whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties, or to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto (Deut. 23:21, 22, 23; Ps. 50:14; Gen. 28:20, 21, 22; 1 Sam. 1:11; Ps. 66:13, 14; Ps. 132:2-5).*

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*No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God (Acts 23:12, 14; Mark 6:26; Numb. 30:5, 8, 12, 13). In which respects Popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself (Matt. 19:11, 12; 1 Cor. 7:2, 9; Eph. 4:28; 1 Pet. 4:2; 1 Cor. 7:23).<sup>106</sup>*

The Heidelberg Catechism, after rejecting all false oaths (Questions 99-100), expressly refers to Matthew 5:34-36 and James 5:12 in Questions 101-102:

*Question: May a pious man swear an oath in God's Name?*

*Answer: Yes, when the authorities require it of their subjects, or when otherwise necessary in order to maintain and foster the glory of God and the well-being of one's neighbor. For the swearing of such oaths is established in the Word of God, and is therefore rightly employed by the saints in the Old and the New Testament.*

*Question: May one swear by the saints or by other creatures?*

*Answer: No, for a lawful oath is an appeal to God, the only examiner of the heart, to testify to the truth and punish me, when I swear falsely; no creature merits such reverence.<sup>107</sup>*

## 2. God swears

*If, since we are always to tell the truth, oaths are unnecessary, why does God make them so often in the Old Testament (Gn. 22:16; Mi. 7:20; Ex. 6:8; Ezk. 20:5; Ps. 95:11)? Or why does the angel in Genesis 12:7 swear "by Him who lives forever," an expression also used in Revelation 10:6?*

George Giesen classifies the 215 Old Testament citations of the word "to swear" (Heb. *sb*) into four groups.<sup>108</sup> In 75 cases, the word designates secular oaths between human beings,<sup>109</sup> in 14 cases judicial-religious oaths in legal matters or vows,<sup>110</sup> in 41 cases covenants made to God by individuals,<sup>111</sup> and in 82 cases covenants made by God.<sup>112</sup> Three citations belong to none of the above classes. Giesen calculates that God Himself made 38% of the Old Testament oaths. There are many other divine oaths designated by other terms. God observes His own rule by swearing only in

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His own Name, as explained in Hebrews 6:13, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself ....”

### To whom does God swear?

#### Texts which mention God “swearing” an oath:

God swears to Noah that He will let the earth endure: Isaiah 54:9.  
God swears to bless Abraham because of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac: Gen. 22:16.  
God establishes the Covenant with Abraham: Gen. 26:3; Ps. 105:8-9; Lk. 1:73; Heb. 6:13.  
God establishes the Covenant with Isaac: Ps. 105:9-11; 1 Ch. 16:16.  
God establishes the Covenant with the patriarchs: Mi. 7:20; Je. 11:5: “...that I may establish the oath which I have sworn to your fathers ...”  
God swears to give Israel the Promised Land: Ex. 6:8; 32:13; Ezk. 20:5-6.  
God swears that the unbelieving Israelites will not enter the Promised Land: Dt. 1:34-35; Num. 32:10-11; Ezk. 20:15; Ps. 95:10-11; Heb. 3:11; 4:3: “I swore in my wrath....”  
God swears that the house of Eli will not be forgiven: 1 Sa. 3:14.  
God swears to David that his descendants will sit on the throne forever: Ps. 89:4-5, 36-39; 132:11-12; Acts 2:30.  
God swears to judge Samaria: Am. 4:2.  
God swears to judge Jerusalem: Am. 6:8: “The Lord GOD has sworn by Himself, The LORD God of hosts says: “I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his palaces; Therefore I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.”  
God swears to judge Israel by scattering the peoples into the whole world: Ezk. 20:23.  
God swears to gather Israel from out of the nations: Ezk. 36:7-8.  
God “swears” a covenant with Jerusalem: Ezk. 16:8.  
God swears to give His Son an eternal priesthood: Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:21, 28: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”  
*God swears that all will swear by His name one day:* Is. 45:23-24: “I have sworn by Myself; The word has gone out of My mouth in righteousness, and shall not return: That to Me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall take an oath. He shall say, “Surely in the LORD I have righteousness and strength.” To Him men shall come, and all shall be ashamed who are incensed against Him.” Rom. 14:11 cites Isaiah, adding the introduction, “As I live....”

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### Texts in which God raises His hand to take an oath<sup>113</sup>

God swears that Israel will inherit the land of Canaan: Ex. 6:8; Nu. 14:30-31; Ezk. 20:5-6 (3x); Ezk. 20:28; 47:14.

God swears to judge the heathen: Ezk. 36:7: “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘I have raised My hand in an oath that surely the nations that are around you shall bear their own shame.’”

God swears to judge His enemies. Dt. 32:40: “For I raise My hand to heaven, and say, ‘As I live forever.’”

### God swears by Himself

Gn 22:16-17: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son – surely I will bless you....”

Heb. 6:13-14: “For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, ‘Surely blessing I will bless you and multiplying I will multiply you.’”

Je. 44:26: “Behold, I have sworn by My great name.”

Ex. 32:13: “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self....”

Am. 6:8: “The Lord GOD has sworn by Himself....”

Am. 4:2: “The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness....”

Dt. 32:40: “For I raise My hand to heaven, and say, ‘As I live forever....’”

1 Sa. 2:30 “But now the LORD says: ‘Far be it from Me....’”

Rom. 14:11: “As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me ...” (citation of Is. 45:23; see above).

“I have sworn by Myself” Is. 45:23; Je. 22:5; Je. 49:13; “but truly, as I live ...” Numbers 14:21, 28; Dt. 32:40; Is. 49:18; Je. 22:24; Je. 46:18; Ezk. 5:11; Ezk. 14:16, 18, 20; Ezk. 16:48; Ezk. 17:16, 19; Ezk. 18:3; Ezk. 20:3, 31, 33; Ezk. 33:11, 27; Ezk. 34:8; Ezk 35:1, 6; Zp. 2:9; Rom. 14:11: (See further examples in the Table “Names of God in oaths.”)

### 3. Jesus and Paul Swear

The fact that oaths are made for spiritual reasons corroborates the theory that neither Jesus (Mt. 5:33-37) nor James (Jas. 5:12) forbid swearing itself, but only swearing by anything or anyone but God Himself. Jesus swears frequently, for the expression, “Verily, verily I say unto you,” is an oath formula (see the table “Oath Formula” below). When the High Priest put Jesus under oath, He answered immediately (Mt. 26:64-65). Paul also made frequent oaths,

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not only to the state, *but to other Christians*, as well (2 Cor. 1:23; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thes. 2:5, 10; Rom. 1:9; Acts 21:23ff.). Oaths will also be sworn during the Millennium, “And he who swears in the earth shall swear by the God of truth ...” (Is. 65:16; similarly Is. 19:18).

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“*Verily, verily*”: Jn. 1:51, 3:3, 5, 11, 5:19, 24-25, 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58, 10:1, 7, 12:24, 13:16, 20-21, 38; 14:12, 16:20, 23; 21:18  
“*Verily*”: Mt. 5:18; 26, 24:2; 34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32.  
*Mt. 26:63-65: “But Jesus kept silent.* (Jesus remained silent until He was put under oath.) And the high priest answered and said to Him, ‘I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said.’” (Once He was under oath, He immediately answered. His “confirmation” of the accusation makes the evidence of witnesses unnecessary.)<sup>114</sup> “What further need do we have of witnesses?” Compare *Dn. 12:7*: Some theologians believe the Angel who swears to be the Angel of the Lord, is Christ before His Incarnation.

“To charge someone” is another term for “putting someone under oath.” An example can be found in *Cant. 2:7; 3:5; 5:8-9* and *8:4*: “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem ... Do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases.” When a wife was suspected of adultery, the priest was to “put the woman under the oath of the curse” (*Dt. 5:21*), which means the same as if the woman had spoken the words herself.

### Paul swears and charges others

2 Cor. 1:23: “Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.”  
Rom. 1:9; Phil. 1:8: “For God is my witness ...”<sup>115</sup>  
1 Thes 2:5: “nor a cloak for covetousness – God is witness.” (The hyphen is often used, because the oath formula stands outside the sentence.)  
1 Thes. 2:10: “You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe....”  
1 Thes. 2:11-12: “just as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God.”  
“Certainly not!” (actually “May it not happen!”): Rom. 3:4, 6, 31, 6:2, 15, 7:7, 13, 9:14, 11:1, 11; 1 Cor. 6:15; Gal. 2:17, 3:21, 6:14 (in this case with the addition “from me.” For the basis that this is an oath formula, see the following box).

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### Nazarite Vows

Acts 18:18: “He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.” Paul had taken a Nazarite vow (Nu. 6:1-21), which was initiated by an oath.

Acts 21:23-24: Paul was arrested in Jerusalem because of the Nazarite vow, which he had taken with four other Jews, paying the fees for having their hair cut. The Jews assumed that he had done this for Gentiles (Acts 21:27-29). Acts 21:27: “Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ....”

## 4. Oath Formulas and Practices

In order to demonstrate that all texts mentioned above indeed involve oaths (see the summary in the tables below),<sup>116</sup> we must now investigate Old Testament oath formula:

### Oath Formulas<sup>117</sup>

“If” (Hebrew ‘*Im*’ or ‘*Im Lo*’) *Ezk.* 36:7; *Is.* 22:14 (both spoken by God); *Gn.* 14:23; *Nu.* 14:28; *Jb.* 27:4-5. (“If my lips will not speak wickedness, Nor my tongue utter deceit.” The sentence is not continued, but the next verse begins with the oath formula, “Far be it from me!”).

“Far be it from” “you,” “me,” “us,” etc.: *Gn.* 18:25; *Gn.* 44:7; *Jos.* 22:29; *Jos.* 24:16; 1 *Sa.* 2:30; 1 *Sa.* 12:23; 1 *Sa.* 20:9; 1 *Sa.* 22:15; 2 *Sa.* 23:17; *Jb.* 34:10 (about God); 1 *Ch.* 11:19; *Jb.* 27:5; 2 *Sa.* 20:20

“The LORD forbid that I should do this thing...” 1 *Sa.* 24:6; 1 *Ki.* 21:3; 1 *Sa.* 26:11.

“Far be it” and the formula “As the Lord Lives”: 1 *Sa.* 14:45;<sup>118</sup> 1 *Sa.* 26:10-11.

“Certainly not!” (literally “may it not be!”) *Lk.* 20:16; *Rom.* 3:4, 6, 31, 6:2, 15, 7:7, 13, 9:14, 11:1, 11; 1 *Cor.* 6:15; *Gal.* 2:17, 3:21, 6:14 (here “from me”). Paul’s expression, “May it not be!” corresponds to the Old Testament expression “Far be it from me!” The Septuaginta translates “May it be far from me!” with “*me gonoito*” in *Gen.* 44:7, 17; *Jos.* 22:29; 24:16 and 1 *Ki.* 21:3 (LXX 20:3). Otherwise it uses “*medamos*,” “not at all,” etc. The formula “amen” is translated “*genoito, genoito*” (*Ps.* 72:19; LXX 71:19). The Old Testament expression “far be it” is derived from the word “to desecrate” and means, “May it be desecration for me before God, if ...”<sup>119</sup>

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“*As the Lord lives.*”: Jdg. 8:19; Ru. 3:13; 1 Sa. 14:39, 45, 19:6; 20:3, 20:21, 25:26, 34, 26:10, 16, 28:10, 29:6; 2 Sa. 4:9, 12:5, 14:11, 15:21; 1 Ki. 1:29, 2:24, 17:1-12, 18:10-14, 22:14; 2 Ki. 2:2, 4, 6; 3:14; 4:30; 5:16, 20; 2 Ch. 18:13; Je. 4:2, 12:16, 16:14, 20, 23:7-8, 38:16, 44:26; Ho. 4,15.

“*As God lives.*”: 2 Sam. 2:27; Job 27:2.

“*As the Lord God lives.*”: Je. 44:26; similarly 1 Sam 1:26.

“*As the Lord of hosts lives*”: 1 Ki. 18:15.

These expressions are used 44 times.<sup>120</sup>

The heathen version: “*As your god lives.*” Am. 8:14 (2x). Similarly in Gn. 42:15-16 “*By the life of Pharaoh*” (The Egyptian Pharaohs were considered divine).

See the references above to God’s oaths, “*As I live.*”

“*The LORD do so to me and more also, ...*”: Ru. 1:17

“... *so do God to me ...*”: 1 Sa. 3:17; 14:44; 2 Sa. 3:35; 1 Ki. 2:23; 2 Ki. 6:31; compare “*May God do so to Abner, and more also,*” in 2 Sa. 3:9; to Jonathan 1 Sa. 20:13; to David’s enemies 1 Sa. 25:22

The heathen version: “So let the gods do to me, and more also,” 1 Ki. 19:2; 20:10

“*Truly*” (“*Amen*” or “*Iulam*”) in combination with other formula: 1 Sa. 20:3; 1 Sa. 25:34

“*Truly*” “*If*” (Hebrew “*Im*” or “*Im Lo*”) Ezk. 36:5; The formula used in Gn. 22:16 “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD” is rendered with “Amen” in Heb. 6:14, which designates the statement following (vs. 14-15) an oath (vs. 16).

“Amen was the answer of the person being sworn in; he swears in saying ‘Amen’.”<sup>121</sup>

“*I have raised My hand in an oath,*”: Ezk. 36:7; “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, “I have raised My hand in an oath, that surely (“*Im Lo*”) the nations that are around you shall bear their own shame” (See further examples above).

The most common oath practice was to raise one’s hand toward Heaven (Gn. 14:22; Ex. 6:8 [in original]; Nu. 14:30; Dt. 32:40 [in original]; Ne. 9:15; Ezk. 20:5-6, 15, 28, 42; Ezk. 36:7; 47:14; Dn. 12:7; Rev. 10:5-6, see boxes above). Another possibility was to lay one’s hand on the loin or hip (Gn. 24:2-3, 9; 47:29).

Some texts include the reason for the oath. God swears “*in His wrath*” (Ps. 95:11. Cited in Heb. 3:11; 4:3. Compare Nu. 32:10; Dt. 1:34; 4:21). On the other hand, Ps. 89:49 speaks of the “*grace which you swore to David in your truth.*” In 1 Sa. 20:17 Jonathan has David vow, because of his love. Oaths, described with a variety of designations in the Bible, could only be taken in God’s Name.

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Besides the expressions listed above in the tables, “God swears by Himself” and “Oath Formulas,” oaths employed expressions which describe His activity or character more distinctly.

<b>Examples of Designations for God in Oaths</b> (Besides the commonly used names, “God”, “Lord” etc.)
<b>God Describes Himself</b> <i>Is. 62:8</i> : “The LORD has sworn by His right hand and by the arm of His strength.” <i>Je. 51:14</i> : “The LORD of hosts has sworn by Himself ...” (Literally, “by His life”) (Compare <i>Am. 6:8</i> ). <i>Am. 4:2</i> : “The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness” <i>Ps. 89:35</i> : “Once I have sworn by My holiness” <i>Je. 44:26</i> : “Behold, I have sworn by My great name” <i>Am. 8:7</i> : “The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob” (God is Himself the pride of Jacob)
<b>Human Designations of God's Attributes</b> <i>Gn. 31:53</i> : “‘The God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, and the God of their father judge between us.’ And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.” <i>Gn. 24:3</i> : “and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth.” <i>Je. 38:16</i> : “As the LORD lives, who made our very souls” <i>1 Ki. 1:30</i> : “by the LORD God of Israel” <i>1 Ki. 17:1; 1 Ki. 18:15; 2 Ki. 3:14, 2 Ki. 5:16</i> : “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand ...” (Elijah)
<b>Angelic Descriptions of God's Attributes</b> <i>Dn. 12:7; Rev. 10:6</i> : Angels swear “by Him who lives forever and ever.”

In contrast to oaths in the Name of the Lord, the Bible definitely forbids taking oaths in the name of other gods, which implies submission to their lordship.

<b>Prohibition to Swear by Other Gods</b>
<b>Prohibition</b> <i>Jos. 23:7</i> : “and lest you go among these nations, these who remain among you. You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them.”

### Disobedience of the Commandment

*Je. 12:16: "And it shall be, if they will learn carefully the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the LORD lives,' as they taught My people to swear by Baal,..."*

*Je. 5:7: "Your children have forsaken Me and sworn by those that are not gods."*

*1 Ki. 19:1-2: Jezebel on the judgement at Carmel, "So let the gods do to me, and more also" (Heathen variation of Israelite oath formula, see above)*

*Zeph. 1:5: "Those who worship and swear oaths by the LORD, but who also swear by Milcom ..."*

*Am. 8:14: "Those who swear by the sin of Samaria, who say, 'As your god lives, O Dan!' And, 'As the way of Beersheba lives!'" (The sin of Samaria is the false god worshipped by Israel.<sup>122</sup>)*

*Ezk. 21:23: "And it will be to them like a false divination in the eyes of those who have sworn oaths with them." The Babylonians believe their oaths to be more effective than the prophesy of divine judgment, which they consider "a false divination."*

## 5. The Meaning of "Oath"

What significance does an oath have? Since the vow is a typically Jewish-Christian convention, we must seek the answer in the Bible. In his study of oath-taking in the various cultures of the world, the anthropologist Ashley Montagu has discovered that swearing is not at all universal. Neither the Japanese, nor the American Indians, nor the Melanesians use oaths. And even where you find similar rites, the vows of many cultures are not absolutely binding and appeal to no deity. *If most of the oaths taken in the Bible are made by God or Jesus, then an oath's significance cannot lie in the distinction between truth and falsehood.* The statement, "An oath is only necessary when the speaker's truthfulness is in question,"<sup>123</sup> contradicts everything Scripture has to say about the question. God Himself swears oaths most of all, followed by the greatest men of faith in both Old and New Testaments. Must we therefore question the truthfulness of God's assertions? Where does Scripture advise us to use oaths only when the truth is unclear?

But what does an oath mean? Let us look at a few examples. Whereas the Old Testament Levitical priesthood was not based on an oath (Heb. 7:20-21), the eternal priesthood of Christ, according to the order of Melchizedek, was (Ps. 110:4). "And inasmuch as He

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was not made priest without an oath (for they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him: The LORD has sworn and will not relent, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”), by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:20-22). The Levitical priesthood could end because it was not instituted by oath; but Jesus’ priesthood cannot end, because it is sealed by an oath.

The same writer explains God’s oath as following: “For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. *Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath*, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:16-18).

In Isaiah 45:23-24, God defines His oath as: “The word” that “shall not return.” Psalm 110:4 tells us, “The LORD has sworn and will not relent.” Psalm 132:11 says, “The LORD has sworn in truth to David; He will not turn from it,” and in Psalm 119:106, David states, “I have sworn and confirmed ....”

God may change His mind, even after He has made a pronouncement, as the Book of Jonah demonstrates. Once He has sworn, however, He will not alter His Word!

Prophetic announcements not bound with a divine oath could be annulled or changed. Jonah’s prophecy that Niniveh would be destroyed in forty days (Jonah 3:4) was annulled by the people’s repentance. In spite of his annoyance, Jonah had been perfectly aware that God acts in this manner, “Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm” (Jon. 4:2). Similarly God tells Eli, “I said indeed that your house and the house of your father would walk before Me forever. But now the LORD says: Far be it from Me; for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Sa. 2:30). God’s promise was conditional, but at this point, He swears an oath (“Far be it from Me”) that Eli’s house must irrevocably come to an end.

God’s unfathomable grace is expressed in the fact that He seldom seals His announcements of judgment with an oath, but

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announcements of grace all the more, not only in the Covenant with Noah, that such judgment would never visit the earth again (Gn. 8:20-9:17). The same principle applies to the history of the people of Israel. Isaiah 54:9-10 relates the two to each other, “For this is like the waters of Noah to Me; For as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,’ says the LORD, who has mercy on you” (Is. 54:9-10).

1. In the first place, an oath is distinguished from a normal statement of truth in that it creates irrevocable facts and includes the requirement to precisely examine the past or the future.

An oath is not given merely in order to authenticate the truth, for then God would never need to swear. An oath, in contrast to a simple statement of truth, creates immutable truths and institutes irreversible responsibilities.

Let’s assume that some unforeseen accident prevents someone from fulfilling a mere promise to provide a life-essential medication. The failure to fulfill a simple promise is not the same as if the promise had been confirmed by oath. Before swearing an oath, one must carefully consider the possibility of mishap. At the scene of an accident, a witness may state that he saw a red car out of the corner of his eye; but if he swears to the statement in court, the driver of the red car could be convicted on that evidence.

An oath can thus only be annulled by confession of guilt and forgiveness, as Lv. 5:4-6 instructs us:

*Or if a person swears, speaking thoughtlessly with his lips to do evil or to do good, whatever it is that a man may pronounce by an oath, and he is unaware of it – when he realizes it, then he shall be guilty in any of these matters. And it shall be, when he is guilty in any of these matters, that he shall confess that he has sinned in that thing; and he shall bring his trespass offering to the LORD for his sin which he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a kid of the goats as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin. (Lev. 5:4)*

A covenant based on an oath could also be “broken” – if one party failed to keep the conditions of the agreement (See Jos. 2:20

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on the conditions to the agreement with Rahab), or if the conditions of the oath did not occur (see Gen. 24:8, 41), the other party was released from his obligations.

God's oath to make Jesus' priesthood an eternal one demonstrates the eternal nature of the oath. In the same way, the vow between Jonathan and David calls on the Lord to be an eternal witness: "Go in peace, since we have both sworn in the name of the LORD, saying, "May the LORD be between you and me (as witness, author's note), and between your descendants and my descendants, forever" (compare 2 Sa. 21:7).

2. "An oath is the invocation of a curse upon one if he breaks his word (1 Sa. 19:6) or if he is not speaking the truth (Mk. 14:7-11)." This definition from a Bible dictionary corresponds to the results of Ashley Montagu's anthropological study: "Oaths are used as a precaution against a curse, which might explain the general tendency to confuse swearing with cursing."<sup>124</sup> The nature of the oath formula as a precaution against a curse is particularly evident in the expression, "The LORD do so to me and more also," or "May God do this with me and add that to me." (1 Sa. 3:17; 1 Sa. 14:44; 1 Sa. 25:22; 2 Sa. 3:35; 2 Sa. 19:13; 1 Ki. 2:23; 2 Ki. 6:31. See specific examples in the tables above. With "Lord" see Ru. 1:17. With the names of specific persons, see the table above.) The expression, "If not" is generally used with an incomplete sentence (Ezk. 36:7; Is. 22:14; Gn. 14:23; Nu. 14:28; Jb. 27:4). Altogether, there are twenty-six examples which call for judgment without defining a specific punishment for breaking the covenant.<sup>125</sup> The formula, "May it be far from me!" is used in a similar fashion (see tables above), particularly when "... if I ..." is added without ending the sentence (1 Sa. 14:45; Jb. 27:5; 2 Sa. 20:20).

In cases of suspected adultery, "then the priest shall put the woman under the oath of the curse, and he shall say to the woman – 'the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people ...'" (Nu. 5:21), should she prove to be guilty. The curse was fulfilled in physical disability (Nu. 5:11-31).

1 Sa. 4:24-28 quotes Saul's oath four times with the word, "Cursed ...." In Ne. 10:29, Israel "... entered into a curse and an oath ...." Nehemiah later "... contended with them and cursed them ... and made them swear by God" (Ne. 13:25). In Jos. 9:20, the leader suggests, "We will let them live, *lest wrath be upon us*

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*because of the oath which we swore to them.*” Dn. 9:11 confesses, “Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; *therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us*, because we have sinned against Him.” God’s enemies will “leave your name as a curse to My chosen; For the Lord GOD will slay you all” in opposition to those who “blesses himself in the God of truth ...” (in Is. 65:15-16).

The idea of cursing oneself in an oath can also be found in the New Testament. Paul calls “... God as witness against my soul ...” (2 Cor. 1:23). The Jews “bound themselves under an oath” to kill Paul (Acts 23:12) and in denying Jesus during His trial; Peter “began to curse and swear, *saying*, ‘I do not know the Man!’” (Mt. 26:74; Mk. 14:71). Of course, both of these last citations refer to oaths taken with sinful intentions, but they clearly illustrate the fact that an oath implied a curse upon oneself.

Dt. 19:16-19 illustrates the seriousness of a false or broken oath. A perjurer is to receive the same punishment which the defendant would have suffered as a result of the false evidence. The Bible also relates examples of people who cursed themselves rashly or under coercion. The Jews, for example, declare, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Mt. 27:25), and experience the fulfillment of the curse in the Jewish wars and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Other texts describe people cursing themselves through parables. When David, the highest judge in Israel, condemns his own crimes of adultery and murder, Nathan, the prophet, replies, “You are the man!” (2 Sa. 12:5-7). After narrating the parable of the traitorous vinedressers, Jesus asks the priests and the Pharisees what they would have done with the wicked stewards. Not until they have suggested the death penalty do they realize that they have condemned themselves (Mt. 21:33-45; Mk. 12:1-12; Lk. 20:9-19).

Self cursing played an important role in cases in which no witnesses could be found to testify to the events. If something a man had been keeping for another were stolen, the keeper had to swear to his own innocence (Ex. 22:9-11). When the dead body of an unknown victim was found close to a city, the elders had to testify under oath that they knew nothing about the matter (Dt. 21:1-9).

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Paul also calls God as witness to invisible facts, such as his prayers for the chance to visit the church in Rome (Rom. 1:9) or his attitude toward the church in Philippi (Phil. 1:8).

The ancient Germanic oath can be defined as following: “The oath was originally a conditional curse over oneself, made according to a ritualistic, sacral-magical form.” For this reason, Germanic society had no difficulties in accepting the Christian use of oaths.

3. An oath always ratifies a covenant, bringing the rights and obligations defined specifically in the oath or those already set by God.

No covenant is made without an oath (see the covenants in Jos. 9:15; 2 Ch. 15:12-15). Some texts use parallelisms to equate “covenant” with “oath” (Gn. 26:28; Dt. 29:11, 13; 2 Ki. 11:4; Ps. 105:9; Ezk. 16:59; Ezk. 17:13-19). Others equate swearing with the covenant (Dt. 4:31; 7:12; 8:18; Ps. 89:3; 105:9; Ezk. 16:8: “*Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you.*”).

We can see the relationship between covenant and oath where a representative swears a covenant for others. In Jos. 9:15-16, for example, the elders swear to a covenant which binds the people as a whole.

*Marriage is also an oath and a vow and a ratification of a covenant* (Pr. 2:16-17; Mal. 2:14; compare Ezk. 16:8; Je. 5:7). The difference between marriage and living together is the difference between simply announcing one’s intentions of staying with one’s partner and making a covenant based on an irrevocable oath before God and man. *Those who deny that the New Testament teaches swearing oaths must therefore also abolish marriage ceremonies and substitute a simple promise for the marriage vow.*

*Only when we forget the vital significance of Biblical covenants sealed by oath (relationship with God, marriage, Israel, church, state, work contract), can we condemn swearing.* I believe that Christians would do well to reclaim the oath, to remind politicians and government officials of the weight of the inauguration oath, which can only be made before God.

The oath made by officials in Nord-Rhein Westfalen, for example, runs, “I swear, that I will administer the office bestowed on me with the best of my ability and to the best of my knowledge, that I will obey and defend the law and the Constitution, conscientiously fulfill my duty and exercise justice towards all. So help me

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God.”<sup>126</sup> The last statement is not required. Should the official prefer not to swear due to religious convictions, he can substitute the formula, “I promise ...” for “I swear ...”<sup>127</sup> which means the very same, according to Biblical principles! What counts in God’s eyes is not the formula, but the solemn commitment.

The Old Testament lays particular value on the inauguration based on God’s law (Ezr. 10:5; 2 Ch. 15:12-15; 1 Ki. 2:43; Dt. 29:10-15. See all references to the 10 Commandments.). This vow to keep the Law could be made by an individual, “I have sworn and confirmed that I will keep Your righteous judgments” (Ps. 119:106). A group could also ratify a covenant for a nation by taking such an oath, as in Ne. 10:28-29, “Now the rest of the people ... and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding – these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes.”

The eighteenth century American revivalist and Calvinist theologian, Jonathan Edwards, considered the believer’s first confession of faith to be an oath according to Dt. 6:13 and Dt. 10:20.<sup>128</sup> *I believe that the actual oath is taken in baptism which ought to immediately follow the first confession of faith:* “There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer<sup>129</sup> of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21).

One Old Testament prophecy connects repentance with an oath: “If you will return, O Israel, ... And you shall swear, ‘The LORD lives,’ in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness; The nations shall bless themselves in Him, and in Him they shall glory” (Je. 4:1-2). Ruth also emphasizes her conversion to the People of Israel (“Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God”) with the oath: “The LORD do so to me, and more also ...” (Ru. 1:16-17).

*The swearing of oaths to God can thus be considered a mark of the People of God.* Dt 6:13 and 10:20 use the swearing of oaths in God’s name as a parallel to “serving” and “fearing” Him. Is. 48:1 correlates “swearing by the Name” of the Lord with “confessing the

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Lord.”<sup>130</sup> In the same way, the worship of false gods can be defined as confessing their names, swearing by them, serving them or bowing down before them (Jos. 23:7). Swearing by other gods is considered idolatry and defection from the Lord (Je. 5:7; Zp. 1:5-6; Am. 8:14). The prophets warn all who serve other gods, not to “swear an oath, saying, ‘As the LORD lives.’”

Even if the Pharisees erred only by swearing by other things, it is not enough to simply swear in God’s Name. The oath must be sincere. Swearing falsely profanes the Lord’s Name (Lv. 19:12) as God’s Name must never be misused at all (Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11). This automatically means that all oaths must be taken in the Lord’s Name; false oaths are no alternative!

An oath should be made “with all one’s heart “ (2 Ch. 15:15), “in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness” (Jer. 4:2). It is a terrible thing to swear, “But not in truth or in righteousness” (Is. 48:1). Swearing “rashly” or “deceptively” is condemned repeatedly (Lv. 5:2-4; 19:12; Je. 5:2; Je. 7:9; Ze. 5:3-4; Mal. 3:5), for it profanes the Name of God. No one who swears falsely is permitted to enter the Temple (Ps. 24:3-4; Ps. 15:1, 4). Scripture continually condemns “perjurers” (Je. 7:9; Ze. 5:3-4; Mal. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:10). Jürgen Kuberski writes:

*Bearing false witness is strictly forbidden in Old Testament law: Ex. 20:16 (one of the Ten Commandments!); Lv. 19:11-12; Ps. 15:4; Je. 5:2; 7:9; Ho. 10:4; Ze. 8:17; see the perjury against Jesus in Mt. 26:59 ff.*

*Mosaic law required that a perjurer (who bears false witness against another person) receive the same punishment as that innocent party would have received, had he been condemned as a result of the evidence: Dt. 19:16-19. Perjury could thus be very severely punished! (The people who gave false evidence in Jesus’ trial should therefore have been crucified!)*<sup>131</sup>

The Ninth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” (Ex. 20:16) refers to giving false evidence under oath in a court of law.<sup>132</sup> The verb used means “to answer” or “to testify in reply to a question.”<sup>133</sup> Ex. 23:1 expressly forbids perjury as well as slander: “You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.”

**Calling Witnesses (Examples)**

*Dt. 4:26; 30:19; 31:28:* “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day ...”  
*Joshua 24:22:* “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD for yourselves, to serve Him.”  
*2 Cor. 1:23:* “Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.”  
*Rom. 1:9:* “For God is my witness ... that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers.”  
*1 Thes. 2:10:* “You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe.”  
 Further Examples: *Dt. 31:19;26; Jos. 22:27;34; Ru. 4:9-11; Jb. 16:19*

Keeping an oath is naturally essential (Nu. 30:3; 6:1-21; Lv. 27:2-25; Dt. 23:22; Jdg. 11:35; Ec. 5:3-4). Ps. 15:4 permits “He who swears to his own hurt and does not change,” to enter the Lord’s presence (see also 1 Samuel 25:22 and 32-34).

*The abuse of oaths does not nullify its usage.*<sup>134</sup> Whoever swears righteous oaths in the Name of the living God with his whole heart, can be sure of God’s approval, for it is “the righteous” and “the good” who “takes an oath” and “the wicked” and “the sinner” “who fears an oath” (Ec. 9:1-2). Je. 5:1-2 equates “executing judgment” and “seeking truth” with swearing sincerely<sup>135</sup> (see also Ze. 8:16-17<sup>136</sup>). He who does not swear, cannot “swear loyalty to God” (Is. 65:16).

“Then they took an oath before the LORD with a loud voice, with shouting and trumpets and rams’ horns. And all Judah rejoiced at the oath, for they had sworn with all their heart and sought Him with all their soul; and He was found by them, and the LORD gave them rest all around” (2 Ch. 15:14-15).

**6. Amen**

“Amen” is actually an *oath of affirmation*, which confirms the statement preceding it (see 1 Ki. 1:36, for a good example) and is usually translated, “so be it.” A better translation would be “It stands firm and is valid,” (according to H. Schlier).

“Amen was the answer of the person over whom the oath was made. He confirmed the oath by saying ‘Amen.’” “Amen” as an

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oath formula has been proven already. It has been mentioned that the oath formula in Gen. 22:16 is given as “Amen” in Heb. 6:14. It is called an “oath” in Heb. 6:16. In the Old Testament, “Amen” is used to ratify divine curses (Nu. 5:22; Dt. 27:15-26; Je. 11:1-5; Neh. 5:13), and to confirm praise to God (1 Ch. 16:36; Ne. 8:6), particularly at the end of individual books of Psalms (Ps. 41:13; 72:19; 89:52; 106:48).

In the New Testament, Jesus uses “Amen” to introduce many of His discourses (“verily, verily” or “truly, truly I tell you”<sup>137</sup>). In the same way, the church uses the term as a response to prayers (church on earth *1 Cor. 14:16*; church in Heaven *Rev. 5:14*). The apostles use it to conclude their books (Rom. 15:33; 16:27; Gal. 6:18; Rev. 22:20) and their doxologies (Rom. 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 16:27; Gal. 1:5; Eph 3:21; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11; 5:11; Jude 25).

*Jesus Himself is called God’s “Amen”* (2 Cor. 1:20; Rev. 3:14; compare Isaiah 65:16) because He is absolutely true and faithful (trustworthy) and because His is the one “faithful witness” (parallel to “Amen” in Rev. 3:14, confirmed by “Amen” in Rev. 1:5-6). All of God’s promises are fulfilled in Him. It is thus a perfectly Biblical custom for the congregation to respond with “Amen” to the “Amen” at the conclusion of a prayer and for the church to respond to the reading of the consecration of the elements in Communion with “Yes, Amen,” as is the custom in some congregations. In doing so, the church confirms that it believes what has been said and claims the power of the sacrament for itself; a custom described by Justin Martyr (circa 100-165 AD). The “Amen” is particularly appropriate in Communion, a covenant sign, for Old Testament covenants were always sealed and renewed by oath. Jesus identifies Communion as a sacrament in the words of consecration, “This is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:23-26; Mt. 26:26-28; Mk. 14:22-24; Lk. 22:19-20). Baptism is the sign of the beginning of our covenant with God, and the Lord’s Supper is the sign of the continuing covenant.

## 7. Benediction

Because a benediction<sup>138</sup> also includes an oath, it is generally concluded and confirmed with an “Amen.”

**Benediction Formula, Benedictions  
and Blessings in the Bible (examples)**

*Gn. 48-49; Dt. 33:1-7:* Jacob's and Moses' last blessings on the tribes of Israel.

*Numbers 6:23-27:* "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel.' Say to them: 'The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace.' So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them."

*Ruth 2:4:* "Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you!' And they answered him, 'The LORD bless you!'"

*Psalms 129:8:* "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; We bless you in the name of the LORD!"

*Hebrews 13:20-21:* "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

*Philippians 4:7:* "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

Further examples: 1 Thes. 5:23-28; 2 Thes. 3:16-18 are frequently used as greetings at the beginning or the end of New Testament epistles.

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