

Demystifying the Jealousy of God: An Exegesis of Exodus 20:1-6

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Abstract

This article seeks to demystify a rare attribute: the jealousy of God, as preached, taught, or caught from our pulpits. Jealousy of God is generally viewed as a negative trait since it is often associated with jealousy of man which often plays out as envy or wounded pride, thus the reluctance to teach and preach about it. In our examination of Exodus 20:1-6, we find that after all, Jealousy is an admirable attribute of God that refers to his intense desire towards the objects of his covenant love, to preserve them only for himself. God's jealousy and his covenant love are two sides of the same coin. God is Jealous because he loves. The message of jealousy is grounded on worship of Yahweh alone which is in sharp contrast with contemporary celebrity worship and 'wo/man of God'¹ syndrome. The manifestation of Yahweh's jealousy in punishing the children for the sins of their fathers is not a negation of self-determination nor an advocacy of collective retribution but an acknowledgment of the devastating effect of the failure of a patriarch to lead his children in the true worship of Yahweh. Yahweh's revelation as a jealous God, being part of the first word of the יהוה of Exodus 20 underscores the importance of teaching and preaching on this attribute in the church. This study hopes to rouse the preachers and biblical teachers to this need and provide helpful insights to prepare them for the noble task of preaching/teaching the whole council of God.

Keywords: Yahweh, Jealousy, covenant love, visiting

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INTRODUCTION

An open-ended survey carried out among Pentecostal churches in Nairobi Kenya whose results were published in January 2016 revealed that eighty-two percent of sermons preached contained explicitly individualistic messages, encouraging followers to believe in their self-

¹ we have here rendered this phrase 'wo/man of God' as referring to contemporary preachers whether men or women, mainly in the Pentecostal/charismatic, neo-Pentecostal stream of the church who present themselves as intermediaries between God and their congregations. They are seen as 'the prophets/ priests in the church through whom, and in most cases-only through whom- God can bless any member of the congregation. These 'men of God' demand that they are 'the anointed ones' and that the congregation must 'tap' into this anointing, mainly through gifting them' and unquestionably obeying them so as to receive God's blessings.

worth and potential for achievement². With this kind of focus on the individual believer, it is not a surprise that the attributes of God preached and taught in most of our churches are those that speak to this individualistic agenda of human empowerment. Little wonder *Jehovah Nissi* ‘the Lord is my banner’, *Jehovah Ropheka*, ‘the Lord your healer’ and *Jehovah Jireh* ‘the Lord shall provide’ among other names of God are far more popular in our pulpits than *El qanna*, ‘the jealous God’ which fits one of the formulas of the name of God as does *El Shaddai*, *EL Elyon* or *El Olam*³. Since very little is to be heard from our pulpits on the jealousy of God, one might wonder. ‘Could it be that the Bible is scanty on the subject?’ Or, ‘Is it that the subject is not understandable?’ Or, ‘Are today’s preachers fallen to the trap of preaching and teaching what the audience’s itching ears want to hear (2 Tim. 4:4)?’ The reader will find that the attribute of God’s jealousy, if well understood, is intriguing, enlightening and as desirable, if not more desirable as the overstated ones.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Literary context and Historical context

In the broad literary context of Exodus 20:1-6, the Israelites receive instructions regarding the covenant stipulation while camped in front of Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:1-40:33). They camped in front of Sinai from the third Month the same year they left Egypt (Ex. 19:1) to the first month the second year (Ex. 40:17); but the covenant stipulations were specifically communicated between Exodus 19:4-24:3. Exodus 19:1-3 narrates the arrival and camping at Sinai, from where Moses went up to the mountain and received instructions from Yahweh. God first communicated his expectations on the Israelites to Moses based on His gracious deliverance (Ex. 19:3-8). When Moses told the People through their elders what God had commanded, they all answered in unison, “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do” (19: 8). But Yahweh promised to repeat the covenant stipulations in the hearing of all Israel (19:9). This promise of Exodus 19:9 is fulfilled in Exodus 20:1-17. It is a record of verbally communicated Yahweh’s words to the sons of Jacob, the nation of Israel from the top of the smoking, thundering Mount Sinai flashing with Lightning.

Though some scholars disagree that Moses was the author of this book, the Jewish tradition (Josh.8:31-35), Jesus’s own testimony (Mark 12:26), early Christian teachings, and conservative scholars attribute the book’s origin to Moses. Evidence from within the book supports the belief that Moses is the author especially considering that many details in Exodus indicate that the author was an eye witness to the events (e.g., 17:14; 24:4; 34:27). An early date of 1445 BC is supported by Bible verses like 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26. However, some critics have proposed a later date of 1290 B.C citing questionable archaeology⁴. The social- political context is especially important to better understand this pericope since Yahweh is revealing himself to the Israelites in the ancient Near Eastern context of the second millennium BC. Understanding how nations were managed, how their laws were made and

² Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Riedl, “INDIVIDUALISM AND EMPOWERMENT IN PENTECOSTAL SERMONS: NEW EVIDENCE FROM NAIROBI, KENYA,” *African Affairs* (December 16, 2015): adv056.

³ David Noel Freedman, “The Name of the God of Moses,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, no. 2 (June 1960): 151.

⁴ Donald C. Stamps et al., *FIRE BIBLE English Standard Version* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014), 87.

covenants cut, how their kings related with them and the expectations of their gods will inform a more objective reading of Exodus 20.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Exodus 20:1-6 consists of the first word of the *הַדְּבָרִים* words of Exodus 20, spoken to Moses in the hearing of all Israel. V. 1 introduces the main speaker, the covenant originator, Elohim, the creator God of all the universe. V. 2 further describes this Elohim as Yahweh, the God of Israel thereby presenting the ground for keeping his commandments by Israelites. V. 3 records Yahweh's first commandment: worship of Yahweh alone. Vv.4-5a explains how breaking the first commandment plays out as idol worship. Vv. 5b is the ground of punishment for not keeping it. V. 5c presents the punishment for not keeping Yahweh's first commandment and V. 6 records the blessing that come to those who keep Yahweh's first commandment.

Theme: God's jealousy in the context of His covenantal love: An exegesis of Exodus 20:1-6.

- I. The ground of Yahweh's commandments (vv. 1-2)
- II. Yahweh's first commandment (vv. 3-5a)
- III. The ground of punishment for not keeping Yahweh's first commandment (v. 5b)
- IV. The punishment for not keeping Yahweh's first commandment (v.5c)
- V. The reward for keeping Yahweh's first commandment (v.6)

i. The ground of Yahweh's commandments (vv. 1-2)

And God spoke all these words saying; I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery⁵ (vv.1-2)

The author begins by introducing us to the speaker, the covenant originator, *אֱלֹהִים* Elohim. The covenant initiator needed be introduced, otherwise, his stipulations would not be taken seriously. Though God had already revealed himself to the children of Israel as Yahweh, the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaak and Jacob (Exodus 3:15), it was important for him to be here introduced by Moses as Elohim to bring out the universality of his domain. Even though other nations in the Ancient Near East referred to their gods as Elohim, it is clear that in the mind of Moses, and the Israelites, Elohim, is the creator God. This creator God of Genesis 1:1 "in the beginning *Elohim*" (Italics added) rules all the universe and the people he created. That this Elohim, who created all other nations chooses to cut a covenant with the nation of Israel as their king is momentous! Yet the Elohim of the Jews, as other polytheistic and henotheistic nations around them may perceive him, speaks! "And Elohim spoke all these words..." As a sharp contrast with the gods of ancient Near East, the God of Israel revealed himself through words. The prophets taunt the nations that their idols cannot speak (Jer. 10:5; Ps. 115:5).

In his speech, God further describes himself as Yahweh. This is his personal name as already known to Israel (Exodus 3:15). The revelation of Yahweh is the ground of the covenant stipulations here made including the prohibitions. As Dunn points out, "Everything depends on the Lord's name, his revealed nature as in 3:14-15. The opening clauses of the Decalogue

⁵ this and the proceeding bible quotations in italics are my own translation.

outline the Lord's prerogatives by the virtue of who he is and what he has done⁶." Lest the community confuse any other known deity with the one speaking, Yahweh specifically makes his introduction. Yahweh names himself as in a royal proclamation⁷. Israel's deity has a personal name, Yahweh, to distinguish it from other known gods.

Further to this, Yahweh reminds the Israelites what he has already done for them. He doesn't enter into a covenant with a subject that he has not delivered. In Exodus 19:4, he said, "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." In delivering the Israelites, he saved them from the bondage of Egypt in a contest against all the deities of the Egyptians (Ex. 12:12), which he won as a testament that he was greater than all others, being God of gods. His introduction as the God who brought them from Egypt, the house of bondage, was to remind them of his gracious hand. The imperative of his commands follows the indicative of his loving deliverance.

i. Yahweh's first commandment (vv. 3-5a)

You shall not have other gods before me.

Verse three in its support of verse two, "I am Yahweh your God..." infers that since Yahweh is Israel's God, they should therefore not have other gods. Bearing in mind the ANE⁸ treaties, God their king is covenanting with them. He should remain their only sovereign. They should not pledge their allegiance to another. The nation of Israel is being warned not to entertain the notion of existence of other gods alongside, against or in the presence of Yahweh. The phrase *עַל־פְּנֵי* 'before me', expresses the author's intent to emphasize the existence of Yahweh in contrast with that of the other gods. Mathew Henry rightly stresses that idol worship is so provocative to God, for it is done right before him.⁹ Nor is there any such a thing as a divine assembly when it comes to Yahweh! He is an assembly by himself.¹⁰

You shall not make an idol or any form of all that is in the heavens from above or what is in the earth from beneath or in the waters from under the earth (v.4).

v. 4 builds up from v.3 through an idea-explanation logical relationship. In v. 3, the prohibition is to not have other gods besides Yahweh. This is to encourage exclusive worship of Yahweh. In v. 4, the prohibition is against making idols with the intent of worshiping them as gods. If the Israelite chose to worship other gods as the neighboring Canaanites did, he would have to make an idol representing that god, for unlike Yahweh, the ANE gods were represented by images. Thus, v.4's prohibition of making an idol ties with v.3's prohibition against worship of other gods. In other words, worship of other gods was primarily idol worship.

You shall not bow to them nor shall you serve them (v.5a)

⁶ James D.G Dunn, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 92.

⁷ William H. C. Propp, *The Anchor Bible EXODUS 19-40 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 167.

⁸ ANE is used here and anywhere else in this paper as an acronym for Ancient Near Eastern.

⁹ Henry, *Mathew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 Genesis to Deuteronomy (Edinburgh: Fleming H Revell Co, 1975), 359.

¹⁰ John H. Walton et al., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 1 Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 230.

V.5 connects with v. 4 and v. 3 through an idea-explanation logical relationship in that v. 3 prohibits worship of other gods, v. 4 prohibits making of idols and v. 5 prohibits bowing to and serving such idols representing either Yahweh or other gods. The reason for making an idol is to bow down to it. The action itself shows that the heart of the one who carves or buys it has forsaken Yahweh.

i. The ground of punishment for not keeping Yahweh's first commandment (v.5b)

For I Yahweh your God I am a jealous God...(v.5b)

The conjunction וְ at the beginning stands out as an important discourse marker¹¹ in this pericope. It represents the first apodosis¹² of the ten words and the only one from vv. 1-6. In this case, it introduces both the situation that gave rise to the preceding vv. 3-4 which prohibits worship of other gods and making idols and the ground constituting the reason why the proceeding idea happens. The fact that Yahweh the God of Israel is a jealous God is the situation that gave rise to the prohibition, not to worship other gods or make idols. It is also the reason why Yahweh will visit the iniquities of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him. Hamilton notes that the motive for avoiding idols, according to v.5, is that Yahweh is a jealous God.¹³

Yahweh's introduction as a jealous God has a close connection with prohibition of idol worship. As Friedman says, "Jealousy is profoundly monotheistic quality in a god. The God of Israel does not tolerate making a statue of another god, bowing to another god, or serving another god of any form."¹⁴ Grudem's definition of jealousy as, "the quality that portrays God as earnestly seeking to protect his honor"¹⁵ helps to show how the jealousy of God is roused by idol worship. Yahweh, having lovingly delivered the nation of Israel and cut a covenant with them, presented himself as their king, and a well-deserving king for that matter, for he gave them the most righteous laws (Deut. 4:8). If they turned to strange gods, they would be dishonoring him. Associating jealousy with honor is in tandem with Hyatt's view that "Yahweh is a God who is jealous of his position."¹⁶ Being that He is Israel's God and King, in protecting his honor, he jealously seeks to keep his position as the God and king for Israel.

The New Testament's treatment of this subject especially borders on the notion of God protecting his own honor. παραζήλω (to make jealous) occurs four times in the Pauline epistles. Though Paul communicates different concepts in his use of this verb, there is one thing

¹¹ Discourse markers are words or phrases that mark relationships between adjacent text segments as in Adina Moshavi, "אֲשֶׁר as a Discourse Marker of Justification in Biblical Hebrew," *Hebrew Studies* 48, no. 1 (2007): 171. In exodus 20:1-5, the discourse marker וְ is a conjunction that mark relationship between foregoing prohibitions of the covenant stipulation and the punishment/benefit that befalls those who keep or break it.

¹² Apodosis in the sense that, like the then part of a conditional clause, if/when the Israelites worship idols or Yahweh in an unbecoming way, the result will be punishment. In other words, Yahweh is saying, 'because I Yahweh your God I am a jealous God, if you worship idols, then you will be punished.'

¹³ Victor P. Hamilton, *EXODUS An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 331.

¹⁴ Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York: HarperCollins publishers, 2001), 337.

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 244.

¹⁶ J. Philip Hyatt, *New Century Bible Commentary EXODUS* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 212.

in common: one subject is set up against the other and rivalry is aroused. 1 Corinthians 10:22 expressly asks, “Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” In other words, when a believer participates both in the Lord’s supper and meat sacrificed to other gods which Paul calls sacrifice to demons, such a believer rouses the jealousy of God. He or she puts himself in rivalry against God, in a losing fight, for God is stronger than man. If we choose to participate in the Lord’s table, that is, if we choose to express our faith and dependence on the atonement of the cross, it has to be, the cross, and nothing else, or God’s honor is in jeopardy. James also warns that God “...yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us” (Jas. 4:5) He is very protective of the Spirit’s regenerative work in Christians that he must oppose worldly entanglement that jeopardizes it. A closer look at the context of James 4:4-10 shows that the saints are called to exclusive worship of God, complete separation from the world, being called to resist the devil and draw near to God. We can’t serve both God and the devil!

In Exodus 20:5, נָקַד is used to represent divine jealousy that demands exclusive worship. It is God’s intense desire towards the objects of his covenant love, to preserve them only for himself.

i. The punishment for not keeping Yahweh’s first commandment (v.5c)

... Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons upon the third and the fourth generations...

The kind of ‘visiting’ promised to the generations of those who hate Yahweh is a kind that he comes with hostile intention to punish. God punishes because he has already warned that he would, and because of his holiness that it is at stake. As we have already seen, God’s jealousy demands exclusive worship and is his mark of ownership of his precious possession. Therefore, if people engage in idol worship, the jealous God cannot allow such a behavior to become a norm.

But does punishing children for the sins of their fathers negate self-determinism? Does it advocate collective retribution? Our research shows that the Bible teaches self-determinism. Individual retribution is the biblical norm. Where collective retribution is employed, it is an exception to the rule and must be left to God. The *רַעַיָּה* *iniquity* of the fathers which brings judgment to the children is not only idol worship but also a failure of the patriarchs to lead his family in the ways of Yahweh. The patriarch, being the head of the family, was commanded to love Yahweh his God with all his heart soul and might, and then teach the covenant stipulations to the children diligently (Deut. 6:4-7). If he failed to do this, he would bring *רַעַיָּה* *iniquity* not only upon himself but upon his children too. This failure on the part of the patriarch could affect the children to the third and fourth generations, for they would then miss out on the blessings attached to the obedience of the covenant. In this case, God may be seen as “executing retribution indirectly by permitting human deeds to produce their appropriate fruits which may then be considered as punishment or reward.”¹⁷

...of the ones hating me...

The patriarchs who persist in hating Yahweh choosing to worship other gods and by extension influencing their children to do the same commit a serious abomination that arouses divine jealousy and brings upon them and their children judgment. As long as their action of hating Yahweh persists, being manifested by choosing other deities in his place, these fathers lead their families astray and they end up facing punishment from God. Yahweh as the sole

¹⁷ Joze Krasovec, “Is There a Doctrine of Collective Retribution in the Hebrew Bible,” *Hebrew Union College Press* 65 (1994) (1994): 39.

redeemer of the Jews deserved their exclusive worship. Yahweh acknowledges the influence that the patriarch has on his children and grandchildren and thus his warning goes beyond the generation that is breaking his covenant to the others that are going to be affected by it through bad mentorship. Patriarchs are known to love their children, and even more so, their grandchildren and desire intensely to leave a good inheritance for them. It is here demonstrated that, of more importance than the material inheritance, patriarchs should strive to leave an inheritance of faithfulness to Yahweh's covenant to the generations after them, otherwise, they would be exposing them to the curses of the covenant (Deut.28:15).

i. The reward for keeping Yahweh's first commandment (v.6)

But showing covenant love to thousands, to the ones loving me;

As opposed to the punishment that comes to the sons of those who hate Yahweh, thousands of generations of those who love Yahweh are bestowed with covenant love. God's punishment lasts but three or four generations but his covenant love lasts for thousands of generations. The sense of continuing to love which is expressed by the participle אֲהַבֵּי *the ones loving me* is contrasted with שֹׂנְאֵי *i.e., the ones hating me*. Those who hate him are evidently the ones who depart from the stipulations of the covenant and lead their children and grandchildren on the same God-dishonoring path. They bring punishment upon their children to the third and fourth generations, but those who persist in loving him invite covenant love on thousands of their generations.

... [that is], *the ones keeping my covenant.*

This clause following the previous clause 'those loving me', explains how they are considered as loving God, that is, by keeping his covenant. Those who love God are those who keep the covenant, and *hesed* is that divine response that attends to his covenantal faithfulness.

CONCLUSION

Yahweh himself describes his character as a jealous God, "...for I Yahweh your God I am a jealous God..." (Ex.20:5). This kind of jealousy is God's intense desire towards the objects of his covenantal love, to preserve them only for himself. It is God's mark of ownership of his treasured possession. God cares so intensely for his covenant people whom he delivered, that he can't allow another to own them. So much depends on these people maintaining the stipulations of the covenant that, if anything or anyone should seek to pull them away, God's jealousy must draw them fiercely back! His jealousy is his strong loving hands of embrace and his fiery eyes of fury against the enemy within and without which seeks to tear the objects of his love away. Equally, God's jealousy is manifested through protecting his honor, and in seeking to keep his position as the God and king of Israel.

One of the most poignant provocations of the jealousy of God in contemporary preaching and ministration is what we have described as the 'worship' of 'the wo/man of God.' Exodus 20:1-6 teaches worship of Yahweh alone who is the God who delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. The prohibition, "You shall not have other gods before me" (vs. 3), should speak to the 'wo/men of God' that Yahweh exists, and he does not need a replacement.

Firstly, the 'wo/man of God' has posed as a god, consciously or unconsciously, but s/he has made the congregants perceive her/him in a manner that is only a reserve of God. The 'wo/man of God' has presented her/himself as the one who not only prays for the people but also answers their prayers! In her/his prayers, s/he commands divinity to do what s/he wants. S/he gives ultimatums and makes promises to the adherents that within such and such a time,

their problem is going to have been solved. But unless God has indicated that, which most of the time is not the case, then the ‘wo/man of God’ is posing as the one who will answer the prayers. As Nel says, “the clients, (that is adherents) attribute their blessings not so much to God as to the anointed “wo/man of God.”¹⁸ We might understand if the wo/ man of God commands the demons, but s/he commands God too! It is common knowledge that one can only command those who answer to her/him. If God answers to the ‘wo/man of God,’ then s/he, ‘the wo/ man of God’, poses as God. The ‘wo/man of God’ by presenting God as sufficiently supplying her/his whims, has reduced God to ‘a god’ that can be manipulated by her/ him at will. Recently, one ‘wo/man of God’ made a blatant divinity claim before his adherents. “I’ve taken personal authority. Strictly based on the words of my tongue. I bless you with eternity. You will see the glory kingdom of God. The heavens have heard,”¹⁹ s/he said. If this ‘wo/man of God’ has authority to bless his/her adherents with eternity and assure them of seeing the glory of the kingdom of God, s/he must therefore be God her/himself! But s/he is not, and so, God’s jealousy is surely roused by such statements. He is a jealous God, and we must preach that such utterances are unacceptable from any preacher, whatever the calling or spiritual endowment. God demands the church’s exclusive worship.

Secondly, the ‘wo/man of God’ has entertained and even encouraged her/his adherents to give her/ him honor that should only be accorded to God. The jealousy of God must be surely roused by such! When testimonies are given, which in many charismatic congregations take center stage weekly, there is less of God and Christ and more of the ‘wo/man of God’ proclaimed. In contrast with the apostles Peter and John who after the miraculous healing at the gate beautiful, directed the praises to Jesus Christ through the words in Acts 3:12, “...Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? ... the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.” Similarly in Acts 14:11, Paul and Barnabas after the healing of the crippled man at Lystra, in response to the statement of the amazed crowds who said, “...The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” They “...tore their garments...” (v.14) and pleaded, “...We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.”(v. 15) The behavior of the contemporary ‘wo/man of God’ is the very opposite of the Apostles. S/he sits and watches as gullible men and women heap all the praises that should be God’s on her/him. Surely, any truly God-worshiping ‘wo/man of God’ should tear her/his garments in utter self-disdain when the congregants treat them in such a manner that should only be reserved to God.

More needs to be heard from our pulpits on the jealousy of God. The Christians who love God should be thrilled to learn that he fiercely draws them by his jealousy. The ‘men of God’, teachers and preachers should be warned that God doesn’t share his Glory with others. They should deliberately point their congregants to God, not to themselves, for He is a jealous God.

¹⁸ Marius Nel, “Changing the Narrative Language of Prosperity in Africa” (2024): 6 of23.

¹⁹ Standard Digital, “I Will Be Assassinated in Jerusalem and Ascend Straight to Heaven – Owuor,” *Standard Entertainment*, accessed March 14, 2024, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/entertainment/news/article/2001312392/i-will-be-assassinated-in-jerusalem-and-ascend-straight-to-heaven-owuor>.

What a beautiful example is portrayed by John the Baptist after he received news that Jesus "... is baptizing and all are going to him" (Jn. 3:26), he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease."(Jn. 3:30).

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