

Book Review: *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* by Carme J. Imes

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Imes, Carmen J. 2019. *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 226 pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-52697-7 (print); 978-0-8308-4836-2 (digital). R242 (\$16.14).

1. About the Author

Carmen Joy Imes is an erudite scholar and professor. She serves as Associate Professor of Old Testament at Prairie College in Three Hills, Alberta. She is married to Danny and they have three children, Eliana, Emma, and Easton.

2. Book Summary

What does it mean to “bear God’s name?” What does it mean to “take or bear or carry the name of the LORD in vain?” This is the concern of Imes’s book. The book takes its title from Exodus 20:7 which states that the name of Yahweh should not be taken in vain. The author regards this as the second of the Ten Commandments, which she links with Exodus 28 where the high priest bears the names of all the twelve tribes of Israel in his service before Yahweh (48–50).

The book begins with a captivating and encouraging introduction for both the reader and sceptic who may find or think reading the Old Testament

is boring and unnecessary because it does not express the grace of God the way the New Testament does. Imes (2019, 1–9) impresses upon her readers that the Old Testament is exciting and contains the grace of God when properly guided, beginning with the exodus of God’s people, Israel, and their constitution as the people of Yahweh at Sinai.

Starting from Israel’s departure from Egypt to their convergence at Sinai, where they all come under Yahweh through the Covenant mediated by Moses, to their sojourning to the Promised Land of Canaan, Imes examines the kind of identity Israel exhibits as a people which bears the name of Yahweh. This is captured in chapters 1 to 7. Uniquely, between chapters 5 and 6, there is an “Intermission” (94–97) where the author pauses and reflects on the entire picture painted from the biblical account and reminds her readers that the story of Israel is an artistic sketch that has more to it than is painted. Chapters 8 to 10 show how in Christ Jesus through the Gospel of grace, Gentile Christians bear God’s identity and name with the goal to truly represent God here on earth and fulfil God’s mission. Often, non-Jewish (Gentile) Christians are confused about their identity as God’s people who bear the name of God. Imes traces this indelible identity all the way from Israel as Yahweh’s “chosen people” in the Old Testament to Christians “chosen in Christ Jesus” to bear God’s holy name in the New Testament.

3. Analysis and Critique

The central exhortation of Imes’s book to her readers is to bear the name of Yahweh and make others appreciate and associate with Yahweh in order to represent him anywhere and anytime, truly and faithfully. Imes seeks to demonstrate the eternal relevance of Old Testament missional ethics exemplified in Israel for Christians, especially for those Christians who

believe they cannot learn anything from the Old Testament because of their supposed preservation of the New Testament message of “grace alone and faith alone in Christ alone.” There are those who see the Old Testament as ethically obsolete and irrelevant compared to the New Testament, but Imes’s book resonates the need to understand the essentials of God’s choice of Israel from among the nations to bear his name and make his name known.

The high point of the book is its careful demonstration that bearing God’s name means going about in the name of the Lord as his representative and honoring him among the nations of the world. Just as the high priest in Israel has to bear the names of all the tribes of the nation on his breastplate and the name of Yahweh on his forehead, so Christians, following the perfect example of Jesus Christ, should carry on themselves the consciousness that God has placed his name on them, carrying that name wherever they go (chs. 3, 4, 8–10). Believers represent the name of their God and must protect and guard it jealously. In the words of the author (2019, 11), “Israel was called to live in the midst of the nations as the people who bore the name of Yahweh and made Yahweh ‘visible’ in the world by walking in his ways and reflecting his character. To bear the name of the Lord was not merely an inestimable privilege and blessing but a challenging ethical and missional responsibility.”

One may question whether Imes’s linking the interpretation and understanding of Exodus 20:7 (cf. Deut 5:11) to Exodus 28 is necessary for her to drive home her point. It is one thing for Israel not to “bear or carry or take the name of Yahweh in vain,” and it is another thing for Israel to “bear the name of Yahweh” as the high priest bears the names of the twelve tribes of Israel as people who are called to be holy and who belong to Yahweh. Exegetically and contextually, it appears that the reference in Exodus 20:7

was primarily intended as a prohibition against using the name of Yahweh in magical ways to manipulate him for selfish or commercial purposes.

That the name of a person or god in the Ancient Near East was believed to contain certain implicit power can be attested to in the Scripture. For example, Balak, the king of Moab, attempted to employ Balaam for the purpose of magically cursing the Israelites in the name of Yahweh in Numbers 22 to 24. This is just one example of magic and cursing in the Ancient Near East (cf. Deut 18:9–14). In the New Testament, John writes of Jesus saying, “I will do whatsoever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13 NRSV). In Acts, Peter encountered a man lame from birth at the temple gate called Beautiful and offered him the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and the man was healed (Acts 3:1–10). Another example is the case of the seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva who used the name of Jesus, whom Paul preached, to cast out evil spirits until they were embarrassed by the evil spirit for using the name of Jesus in vain (Acts 19:11–20).

The examples above present sufficient evidence of the belief in the implicit potency in the name of a person or deity for magical or miraculous purposes. To use the name of Yahweh for magical purposes or for selfish or commercial reasons amounts to “bearing, carrying, or taking his name in vain.” This is a valid interpretation for Exodus 20:7 that does not necessarily require linking the meaning to the role of the high priest in bearing the names of the twelve tribes as recorded in Exodus 28, as Imes posits. While her point is noteworthy in a general sense, it does not necessarily apply to the understanding of Exodus 20:7.

Another question that could be raised is how Imes would relate this theme of Bearing God’s Name to the modern critical study of the Old Testament that discusses the deuteronomistic tradition, law, and theology

as the work of the Deuteronomist(s). The deuteronomic school of thought sees Deuteronomy as a product of the experience of Israel particularly from Joshua to Kings and some of the early latter prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Imes's presentation assumes the conservative concept of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and does not reflect the alternative understanding of the compilation of the text from Deuteronomy to Kings, following the Hebrew arrangement (the tanak) as the work of the Deuteronomist(s) who reflect(s) Israel's failure to keep the covenant with Yahweh (therefore, her responsibility for the predicament that befell the nation). Imes's presentation would benefit from engaging these alternatives. Concerning layout, the grey-coloured areas in the text are insightful as they give interesting background comments to clarify some information that may be confusing. Even when the author is not sure, she presents a very objective and scholarly position that leaves readers to contemplate and decide for themselves. The archaeological information used occasionally to enrich the biblical information is very helpful. The references to additional resource materials at the end of each chapter are eminently useful for any serious reader who wishes to further learn from the author's presentation. The section on "discussion questions" (195–201) highlights important areas in the book with which the reader can interact and reflect upon further.

On page 221, under the heading "Image Credits," 1.1. is repeated. The first at the beginning and the second at the end. I suggest that the second be given a different numbering consistent with the order of the Figure arrangement.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

Imes's book is exciting, breathtaking, and transformational. This book establishes an excellent relationship between the Old and New Testaments. It demonstrates convincingly the continuity of God's purpose for choosing Israel as his treasured possession, and believers in Christ Jesus to bear his name among the people of the world in order to be a blessing to the world. It serves to encourage Christians to take the name of the Lord seriously and be faithful ambassadors for Christ Jesus in the world.

I highly recommend this text for foundational studies in theological seminaries, universities, and church discipleship classes, to help Christians understand what it really means to bear the name of Christ and not make a mockery of their designation and calling as Christians. This will lay a solid foundation for their studies of the Scriptures. The identity and calling of all Christians is to always bear the name of God wherever they find themselves.

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