

# A Critical Note on the Formula *'nj jhwh* in the Holiness Code

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## Introduction

*'nj jhwh* and its longer variant *'nj jhwh 'lhjkm* is a formula that is used in a variety of contexts throughout the Hebrew Bible and is especially prominent in the Holiness Code and the book of Ezekiel. However, its actual meaning or, should we say, the various meanings it has in different frames of reference are not completely clear. Lacking any predicate, there is no real alternative except to translate the formula as a nominal clause “I am YHWH (your God)” or “I YHWH am your God.” Yet it is rather difficult to determine what that actually means and what is the purpose of that statement, apart from simply declaring the divine name. The formula is used asyndetically in most cases and lacks any direct link to its context.

Walter Zimmerli was the first biblical scholar to identify *'nj jhwh* and its longer variant *'nj jhwh 'lhjkm* as a formula and he discussed its meaning and usage in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup> Basing his analysis on its occurrence in the preamble to the Ten Commandments (Ex 20,2; Dtn 5,6) and the similar usage in Lev 18,2, Zimmerli named the formula *Selbstvorstellungsformel* (self-introduction formula). Through the formula, God introduces himself by saying his holy name. He reveals himself as the God of the Exodus, since it was during that time that he first made known his name to Israel.<sup>2</sup> Zimmerli explains that the formula's purpose is to emphasize God's leadership of and his faithfulness towards Israel throughout history by referring to the Exodus.<sup>3</sup> Second, the formula is used in legal contexts to strengthen the force of particular laws by linking them to the Exodus tradition and the Sinaitic covenant.

In his three-volume commentary on the book of Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom argued for a different understanding of the formula in the Holiness Code: “It seems far fetched that the only purpose of this formula in legal contexts is to

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1 Walther Zimmerli, “I Am Yahweh,” in *I Am Yahweh*, ed. Walter Brueggemann, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 1–28; originally published as “Ich bin Jahwe”. In *Geschichte und Altes Testament: Festschrift Albrecht Alt*. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 16 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1953, 179–209; reprinted in *Gottes Offenbarung: Gesammelte Aufsätze I*, Theologische Bücherei 19 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1969)), 11–40.

2 Cf. Ex. 3,13–22.

3 Cf. *ibid.*, 22.

identify its divine author with the God of the Sinaitic covenant.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, he claimed that *'nj jhwh* is used to express YHWH's authorship of the Holiness Code and therefore stated the reason of its legal force; because God has set up these commandments, the Israelites are to follow them. Thus, in expressing the divine authorship, the formula is similar to *n'm jhwh* in the prophetic texts.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Milgrom regards the formula as an ellipsis for “I YHWH your God (have spoken)” or “I YHWH (have spoken)” and translates it this way throughout the commentary.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Milgrom not only claimed that the elliptic formula is an “abbreviated form of the statement that YHWH has spoken,” but also that he “is certain to punish if his words are not fulfilled.”<sup>7</sup> His claim is based on Num 14,35 where the formula is used in an extended form that he considered to be the “complete formula”: *'nj jhwh dbrtj 'm-l' z't 'sh* – “I YHWH have spoken: Thus I will do.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, he referred to a variant form of the formula that is used 14 times in the book of Ezekiel: *'nj jhwh dbrtj w'sjtj* – “I YHWH have spoken and will act.”

To be sure, there are various indications for a strong connection between the Holiness Code and the book of Ezekiel.<sup>9</sup> There is also reason to regard Num 14,26–35 as an insertion by H.<sup>10</sup> However, these literary connections do not necessarily mean that the formula in the books of Ezekiel and Numbers is used in the same way as it is in the Holiness Code. It is curious that Milgrom supported his claim exclusively with references from outside the Holiness Code, even though the formula is attested 50 times in it.

This article will examine Milgrom's claim that *'nj jhwh* and *'nj jhwh 'lhjkm* in the Holiness Code are equivalent to *n'm jhwh*. First, we will look at the linguistic basis of the formula in Lev 17–26. Second, we will discuss whether the legal context of the Holiness Code is comparable to Ezekiel and Num 14,35. Third, we will examine the formula's connection to the Exodus tradition, and finally we will consider its link to the concept of holiness.

## Linguistic Observations

As already stated, the formula has a short form (*'nj jhwh*) and a long form *'nj jhwh 'lhjkm*). The long form at times may use pronomial suffixes other than the

4 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3A (New York: Yale University Press, 2008), 1517.

5 Cf. *ibid.*, 1517f.

6 Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*.

7 Cf. *ibid.*, 1518.

8 Cf. *ibid.*, 1518.

9 *Ibid.*, 1362.

10 Cf. Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 91–92.

2<sup>nd</sup> person plural, depending on the context. Karl Elliger claimed that there is a theological difference in meaning of the two forms: the short one refers to God's holiness and the long one points to YHWH's action in history.<sup>11</sup>

Will die erweiterte Formel 'Ich bin Jahwe, euer Gott' auf den schuldigen Dank für die empfangenen Wohltaten als Motiv für das Halten der Gebote durch das Volk hinweisen, so will die reine Namensformel Gehorsam wecken als die im eigensten Interesse des einzelnen Menschen liegende Konsequenz aus dem Wissen um die Heiligkeit Gottes.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, Elliger did not consider the two forms of the formula synonymous, but rather as two distinct formulas, the short one is a "Heiligkeitsformel" or "Hoheitsformel" and the long one a "Heilsgeschichtsformel" or "Huldformel."<sup>13</sup> The distinction that Elliger draws, however, is not convincing. On the one hand, both variants of the formula are used with almost equal frequency (26 occurrences for the short form, 24 for the long). On the other hand, his assumption that these phrases have two distinct senses does not stand up to close scrutiny. Although he correctly pointed out that the long formula is frequently used to reference God's action in history, especially the Exodus, there are several examples of the short formula with the same context (e.g., 22,33; 26,45). Moreover, the short version is also employed with regards to God's holiness and his sanctifying power (19,2; 20,8; 21,15) which, according to Elliger's thesis, would only be characteristic of the long formula.

The formula is found 54 times in the book of Leviticus, 50 of which occur in the Holiness Code.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is the formula that is most extensively used by H and can be described as its "signature seal."<sup>15</sup> All but one of these occurrences occurs at the end of a legal pericope, a fact already mentioned by Zimmerli.<sup>16</sup> Zimmerli, however, did not focus on the majority of cases but concentrated on Lev 18,2, the single exception that uses the formula as a preamble to a legal section. In this particular case, it is to be admitted that the most likely purpose of the formula is to make the laws of Lev 18 equivalent in importance to the Ten Commandments.<sup>17</sup>

11 Karl Elliger, "Ich bin der Herr – Euer Gott," in *Kleine Schriften zum Alten Testament*, ed. Hartmut Gese and Otto Kaiser, Theologische Bücherei 32 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966), 211–231; first published in *Theologie als Glaubenszeugnis: Festschrift Karl Heim* (Hamburg: Furche, 1954), 9–34.

12 Ibid., 216.

13 Cf. Ibid.

14 Usually Lev 17–26 is considered to be the Holiness Code, whereas Milgrom argues that Lev 27 is also part of H. This controversy, however, has no implications for the problem discussed in this essay, as there are no occurrences of the formula in chapter 27.

15 Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1517.

16 Zimmerli, "I Am Yahweh," 3.

17 The beginning of the Decalogue (Ex 20,2; Dtn 5,6) uses 'nkj instead of 'nj and the suffix of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular rather than plural, a fact that is disguised by the English translations.

Yet the formula's function at the end of a legal passage seems to be a different one. A self-introduction at the end of a pericope is rather odd. The Decalogue does not use the formula at the end of any commandment. Rather, the repeated use of *'nj jhwh*<sup>18</sup> in the closing of a legal unit indicates that the formula actually states the basis of obedience to the law. This assumption is supported by the fact that 10 of the 50 occurrences in the Holiness Code use the conjunction *kj*, which discloses its strong causal sense.<sup>19</sup>

What sense, then, is expressed by the formula? Whilst it is true that the formula is used on its own in most cases, on occasion an adjective, a participle and a relative clause are attached to it so as to specify its meaning. These modifiers are the clue to its meaning, attesting to the fear of God, the Exodus tradition, and, most prominently, holiness.

### The Fear of God

On three occasions, the formula is used in addition to a preceding commandment to fear God (19,14; 19,32; 25,17). The manner of usage is similar in all three cases. First, the particular law is specified; then the commandment to fear God is stated; finally, the verse is closed by the formula. In 25,17 a causal *kj* makes a direct link between 'the fear of your God' and the declaration that 'I am Yahweh your God'. The character of all three laws is the same; all of them express social obligations that protect the helpless from exploitation. In 19,14 the Israelites are prohibited to curse the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. Verse 19,32 is a command to respect the elders and to show them due deference—in particular to stand up before them as a gesture of esteem and politeness. Finally, verse 25,17 is a prohibition against 'oppressing' or cheating (*jnh* Hiph'il) one's neighbour. Milgrom argued that in all three cases the law is unenforceable by a human court, therefore *wjār'ētā mē'loh<sup>e</sup>jcā* is attached to each law to underscore God's watchful eye over the laws.<sup>20</sup> The Israelites are to keep the commandments because God will punish them if they do not do so. *'nj jhwh*, therefore, is a statement of God's enforcement of his divine laws in the event that Israel does not observe them. Milgrom is correct in observing that the formula contains a threat of punishment.

However, he also argues for the similarity between the phrases *'nj jhwh* and *n'm jhwh*. Milgrom adduced evidence from two extended forms of the formula used

Nevertheless, the usage in Lev 18,2 is clearly similar to Ex 20,2 and Dtn 5,6. Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1518.

18 As the short and the long form of the formula are used synonymously, we use the short variant inclusively representing also the long variant.

19 Cf. 19,2; 20,7; 20,26; 21,15; 21,23; 22,16; 24,22; 25,17; 26,1; 26,44.

20 Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1641 and 1703; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2179.

in Num 14,35 (*'nj jhwh dbrtj 'm-l' z't 'śh*) and in the book of Ezekiel (*'nj jhwh dbrtj w'śjtj*; used 14 times). But the contexts of these passages are different from that of the Holiness Code. In Num 14,35 the formula refers back to the preceding verses in which God announces the punishment that he will bring upon Israel for her inequities. The formula is used at the end of this pericope as a summary and confirmation of the punishment proclaimed. By contrast, in the three passages discussed above, no concrete punishment is announced and the formula is used only to express that God will discipline his people *if* they do not keep his law. It functions as an implicit threat of punishment rather than as a confirmation of an announced sentence. Put another way, Num 14,28–35 is very similar to a prophetic word of doom, whereas the three passages in the Holiness Code are clearly legal pericopes.

The use of the formula in the book of Ezekiel does not support Milgrom's claim either. Similar to Num 14,35, all occurrences of the formula in the book of Ezekiel are found in prophetic units. The formula is used to confirm the divine origin and the certain fulfillment of the prophecy. Undoubtedly in Ezekiel, the formula is similar to *n'm jhwh*, which is generally used to verify a prophetic word. Indeed, in Eze 37,14 both formulas are juxtaposed to each other to underscore the same point. This verse also makes clear that *'nj jhwh dbrtj w'śjtj* is not only used in contexts of punishment but also as a confirmation of salvation.<sup>21</sup> But the context of the formula in Ezekiel is very different to that of the Holiness Code.

### The Exodus Tradition

More prominent than the connection to fear of God is the formula's link to the Exodus tradition, which is brought into play in two distinct ways.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the formula and a reference to the Exodus are linked to give the rationale for specific laws that have their origin in Israel's experience of the Exodus, especially the freedom from slavery and exploitation that is connected with it. For instance, in 25,38 a relative clause is attached to the formula ("I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God."), in order to give the reason why the Israelites should not exploit their fellow citizens who have become poor. Because God has set them free and given them the land, they are to support each other – in contrast to how they were exploited in Egypt. This law of social solidarity is plainly summarized in 25,55, which is the prohibition of enslaving fellow Israelites who cannot repay their loans. They have to work for their creditors and become like hirelings to them, but they are not to be considered as slaves, as they are paid for

21 Which is also the case in Ez 17,24; 34,4; 37,14; 36,36.

22 Lev 19,36; 22,33; 23,43; 25,38; 25,55; 26,13; 26,45.

their work and they are free from their debts in the year of Jubilee. This is due to the fact that the Israelites are ultimately Yahweh's servants, because he brought them out of Egypt – a statement that ends with the formula of “I am Yahweh your God.”

On the other hand, the formula, combined with a reference to the Exodus, is used to emphasize God's good intentions towards Israel. For instance, v. 26,13 closes the unit in which God announces his blessing on Israel if they keep his law. As a confirmation that this promise of overwhelming blessing is reliable and will be sure, the formula is stated and is followed by a relative clause that reminds Israel of the Exodus and of God freeing his people from slavery. Furthermore, in 26,45 a reference to the Exodus and the formula are brought together to highlight that God will neither break his covenant with Israel nor destroy them completely, even if he punishes them for not keeping the law. In both cases the positive experience of the Exodus is used to confirm YHWH's reliability and his care for Israel.

### The Obligation of Holiness

As its title suggests, the central issue in “the Holiness Code” is holiness. The formula *'nj jhwh* plays an important role<sup>23</sup> in that context, as it expresses the connection between God's holiness and Israel's obligation of holiness. This connection is twofold: the formula points out God's own holiness is the reason for Israel to be holy; and it stresses God's sanctifying and separating action.

Leviticus 19,2 states what is considered to be the core of the Holiness Code: “You shall be holy, for I, YHWH your God, am holy” (*qdšjm thjw kj qdš 'nj jhwh 'lhjkm*). Here, God's own holiness is given as the rationale for Israel to be holy. The command of holiness is clearly revealed as an *imitatio dei*.<sup>24</sup> Because God is holy, those faithful to him should imitate him by keeping his law. Moreover, this concept of *imitatio dei* expresses God's very nature: YHWH is holy. It is crucial to understand that this idea of God's holiness is unique in the context of Semitic polytheism. Whereas in other Canaanite religions various deities and even realms of the world of man could be sources of holiness, Yahwistic religiosity understands God as the *only* source of holiness.<sup>25</sup> Holiness is YHWH's “quintessential nature.”<sup>26</sup> This central theological concept is expressed both in Lev 19,2 and in 20,26 by the formula *'nj jhwh*.

Holiness requires separation. Those who are to imitate God's holiness must be separate from all defilement. This separation requires two distinct processes.

23 A total of 11 occurrences are directly linked to holiness: 19,2; 20,7; 20,8; 20,24; 20,26; 21,8; 21,15; 21,23; 22,9; 22,16; 22,32.

24 Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1604–1607.

25 Cf. *ibid.*, 1711.

26 *Ibid.*, 1712.

First, the people must be set apart by God (hence he is the only source of holiness). Second, they must maintain this holy status by separating themselves from anything impure. The first aspect is expressed in 20,24 with a combination of the formula and a relative clause: “I am YHWH your God, who separated you from the peoples” (*'nj jhwh 'lhjkm 'šr-hbdltj 'tkm mn h 'mjm*). Then, in Leviticus 20,26, both aspects of separation are combined to sustain a call to holiness: “You shall be holy to me, for I YHWH am holy and separated you from the peoples, that you shall be mine” (*whjtm lj qdšjm kj qdws 'nj jhwh w'bdl 'tkm mn-h'mjm lhjw l*). Lev 22,32–33 reveals that this separation’s ultimate starting point is the Exodus: “You shall not profane my holy name but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel; I am YHWH your God, who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I am YHWH.”

What is similar in both aspects, God’s holiness and his separation of Israel from other people, is that they are used as a rationale for Israel to be holy. Because God is holy, the Israelites must also be holy, and because God has separated them from all other peoples, they must maintain this separation and keep themselves separated – which means in both cases to keep his law. It seems to me that both aspects, God’s holiness and his separating action, are combined in the participial phrase *mqdškm* (“who sanctifies you”), which is used 7 times together with the formula in the Holiness Code.<sup>27</sup> It is YHWH who sanctifies the Israelites by separating them from the rest of humankind and having them share in his holiness. Yet because God sanctifies Israel, her people have to follow his law: “And you shall keep my statutes and do them for I, YHWH your God, sanctify you” (*wšmrtm 't-hqtj w'šjtm 'tm 'nj jhwh mqdškm*).<sup>28</sup> As this combination of formula and participle is prominent in the Holiness Code, it seems to me that the qualifying statement that God sanctifies Israel is implied in the other occurrences of the formula that lack further explanation – “I am YHWH (your God)”. Probably the best example of this line of thinking is 20,7: “Behave as sacred and be holy for I YHWH am your God” (*whqđštm whjtm qdšjm kj 'nj jhwh 'lhjkm*). In this verse, Israel is again commanded to sanctify herself and be holy, but in contrast to all the above cases, the rationale for this commandment is not to be found in the declaration that God himself is holy nor in his separation of the Israelites nor in his sanctification of them, but simply because he is YHWH their God. The similarity between this call to holiness and the other passages suggests that *'nj jhwh* may be seen as a short form of *'nj jhwh mqdškm*.

27 Cf. 20,8; 21,8; 21,15; 21,23; 22,9; 22,16; 22,32. The suffix (which is the object) changes with respect to the grammatical context, but the subject always remains YHWH.

28 Lev 20,8.

## Conclusion

It has been argued that linguistically *'nj jhwh* and *'nj jhwh 'lhjkm* are variants of the same formula. While David Milgrom is correct in pointing out that the formula's purpose at the end of a legal pericope is to give the rationale for the law, his equation of *'nj jhwh* with *n'm jhwh* in prophetic texts is open to question. His analysis is based on Num 14,34 and several verses in the book of Ezekiel, which are contextually different from the Holiness Code. Consequently, it is doubtful that Milgrom's translation of *'nj jhwh* as "I YHWH (have spoken)" is correct. Rather, we have explained that the formula is connected in the Holiness Code to semantic elements that attest to a different meaning of the formula. First, *'nj jhwh* is used in relation to the Exodus, in order to give the rationale for specific social laws and to stress God's good intentions towards Israel. Second, the formula is strongly linked to the concept of holiness. The formula is used to affirm God's own holiness, as well as to point out that he has separated Israel from the other peoples. Both aspects are combined in the statement of *'nj jhwh mqđškm* ("I am YHWH, who sanctifies you"). This statement is not only attested 7 times in the Holiness Code (which is the addition to the formula most often used), but also summarizes its central theme. Therefore, it is suggested that all occurrences of the formula *'nj jhwh* and *'nj jhwh 'lhjkm* that lack further explanation, should be considered as implying the participial expression *mqđškm*. As a result, we can say that there is adequate reason to argue against an understanding of the formula as similar to *n'm jhwh* and to translate it as "I YHWH (have spoken)," but to regard it as an ellipsis for *'nj jhwh mqđškm* – "I am YHWH, who sanctifies you."

### Abstract:

In this article, the meaning of the formula *'nj jhwh / 'nj jhwh 'lhjkm* in the Holiness Code is discussed. It is found that David Milgrom's suggestion to understand the formula as synonymous to the formula *n'm jhwh* does not fit the linguistic and theological context of the Holiness Code. Rather, it is argued that *'nj jhwh / 'nj jhwh 'lhjkm* in the Holiness Code is strongly related to the concept of holiness and should be understood as a short form of *'nj jhwh mqđškm* – "I am YHWH, who sanctifies you."

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