**The Formula “I am YHWH your Lord” and its Legal Uses in the Holiness Code**

The idiom “I am YHWH” or “I am YHWH your Lord” is famously a characteristic feature of the Holiness Code (Lev.17-27). Some occurrences are well explained within their context, while other occurrences are poorly understood, since they appear without any clear reason. This is true especially of the recurring appearances of the idiom in the law code of Leviticus, where it is scattered among a list of commandments, with minimal or no apparent connection to the verses in which it is placed. The goal of this paper is to suggest an interpretation for these distinct uses within the legal code. But before focusing on the legal code, let me begin by looking at the meaning of this phrase more generally.

In some cases, the idiom אני יי seems to function as an introductory statement. A good example for this use is found in Exodus 6:2-3: “ (2) God spoke to Moses and said to him, אני יי. (3) I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as אל שדי , but by my name יי I did not make myself known to them”. Since until this point God was known to the patriarchs only by the name *El Shaddai*, Moses is not expected to recognize this God who now presents himself with his new name, Yahweh. Thus, God explains that “אני יי”, that is, “the same God who was known to the patriarchs by the name *El Shaddai* is me.” Here the meaning of the phrase is self-presentation. In other occurrences, this idiom does not signify a mere presentation of God but rather is made as a statement, almost an argument. This is a case of what is sometimes called “the recognition formula,” where the miraculous nature of certain events is considered as proving that these events were generated by God. For example, according to Deuteronomy 29:5, the miraculous sustenance of the Israelites in the desert should have made them recognize that it was God who took them out of the land of Egypt: “(5) I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet. (6) You have not eaten bread, and you have not drunk wine or strong drink, that you may know that I am the Lord your God אני יי אלוהיכם .” It is a miracle that, in their wanderings in the desert, the Israelites survived without ordinary human food, bread and wine. This miracle testifies to the fact that God was the cause of all this.

When we turn to the appearances of the idiom in the collection of laws in Leviticus the picture is more complex. For example, its use in the opening verse of Leviticus 19 is quite intuitive. Within the context, it is easily understood as providing motivation for action: “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy כי קדוש אני יי אלוהיכם)).” The reason why the people of Israel should be holy is because God is also holy. Notably, here the idiom אני יי אלוהיכם does not stand alone, it is tied to the adjective קדוש. However, in other verses of the same chapter, the *raison d'etre* of the uses of the idiom אני ייis much less clear. Take for example verse 18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: אני יי.” It is not clear how the command to avoid holding grudges or taking revenge, and to love one’s fellow Israelite, is connected to the sealing idiom אני יי, except for the general fact that it is God who is the author of these commandments. Here is another example, from the law of the fourth year’s fruit, in verses 23-25 of the same chapter: “(23) When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. (24) And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the Lord. (25) But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit, to increase its yield for you: אני יי אלוהיכם.” The law of the fourth year’s fruit is quite detailed: the fruit is forbidden for three years, in the fourth year it is still holy to God, and only in the fifth year is it allowed to be eaten with no restriction. Following these details comes the idiom אני יי אלוהיכם, which seems to function as a sealing statement, however it suggests no specific connection to the verse in which it is placed, other than simply recalling who is the commander of the detailed prohibition. These are just arbitrary examples; the same pattern repeats itself again and again throughout the law code in chapters 18-25.

Thus, when we look at each of these specific occurrences of the idiom in the law code, it may seem that its function is to serve as a reminder that the commandment at stake is a divine imperative. However, this explanation fails to account for the formulaic style that characterizes the recurring appearances of the idiom throughout the collection of laws. In chapter 19 alone it appears 16 times in the course of the chapter’s 37 verses. If the idiom was intended to notify the addressees that God is the commander of all these laws, there was surely no need to reiterate the message so repetitively. The recurrence of the idiom which seals so many individual commandments suggest that rather than simply conveying information, the phrase is part of a formula of some sort.

I will argue that idiom אני יי , or in its longer phrasing אני יי אלוהיכם is used here as an oath formula; one that is taken by God, and at the same time imposed on the people who are subjected to the laws. In other words, through the use of this formula, each specific law is imposed as an oath, which is in fact a conditional curse, on its subjects. Furthermore, I wish to suggest that this notion of imposing laws as oaths is rooted in the legal heritage of the Ancient Near East. This heritage has several clear resonances in the Bible, and, I argue, the uses of the idiomאני יי as a sealing formula for specific commandments is yet another such case. To make this argument I will proceed from here in two parts. First, I will survey some instances where the idiom אני יי functions as an oath in the Bible, outside the law collection of Leviticus. This significance was already recognized by previous scholarship with regards to some verses in Exodus 6 and in the book of Ezekiel, and I will thus present it only briefly. In the remainder of my talk, I will demonstrate the Ancient Near Eastern background of the law collections of Leviticus, where laws were entrenched within a conceptual structure in which they were shaped or perceived as sworn oaths.

## Part I

The clearest case where אני יי signifies oath-taking by God is found in Exodus 6. Here, the idiom is used four times in the course of seven verses, 2-8. As I mentioned earlier, in verse 2 its task is the self-presentation of God, intended to establish his association with the divine entity known by the name *El Shaddai*. Another occurrence that is rather clear is that in verse 7, where we have some version of the recognition formula: the miraculous deeds of God testify to his Godly nature. However, in verses 6 and 8 the same idiom seems to not be functioning in either of these ways. Here, it is attached to a self-undertaking on behalf of God, who declares that he will redeem the children of Israel from their slavery in Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land. Thus, we read in verse 6: “Say therefore to the people of Israel, אני יי, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.” And similarly in verse 8, only this time the idiom is quoted after the statement describing the divine undertaking rather than prior to it: “ I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord. אני יי”.

What could be the meaning of the idiom אני יי in these verses? Several rabbinic *midrashim* identify it as signifying an oath formula. They are here on the slide before you, and I will not read them for the lack of time. This reading was accepted by several modern scholars, such as Moshe Greenberg, William Prop and others, since it is supported quite bluntly by a very close parallel in Ezekiel 20:5-6: “Say to them: Thus said the Lord God: On the day that I chose Israel, I gave My oath-(literally, I raised My hand) to the stock of the House of Jacob; when I made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, I gave my oath (raised my hand) to them, when I said, אני יי אליהכם. That same day I swore (raised my hand) to them to take them out of the land of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey, a land which I had sought out for them, the fairest of all lands.” Here Ezekiel suggests what seems to be a commentary on the verses of Exodus. The phrase “I raised my hand to them,” mentioned three times in these two verses in Ezekiel, means “I swore to them.” Thus, according to Ezekiel, when God said, “אני יי אלוהיכם,” he actually swore, took an oath to redeem the Israelites from the land of Egypt, and further reaffirmed his previous oath sworn to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give their seed the land of Canaan.

Alongside this parallel from Ezekiel, William Prop offers a brilliant insight as to why this idiom conveys the meaning of oath-swearing. As he explains, just as one swears in the name of God, or a king, so too may God or the king swear by their own name. Thus, Pharaoh swore to Joseph that he would make him supreme ruler of Egypt, by calling his own name, as we read in Genesis 44:14: “And Pharaoh said to Joseph, I am Pharaoh, and without you no one shall raise his hand and his foot in all the land of Egypt.” By stating “I am Pharaoh”, Pharaoh is clearly not introducing himself to Joseph; rather he is making a commitment to Joseph to grant him rulership. Pharaoh thus swears by stating “I am Pharaoh”, and similarly God swears by stating אני יי.

## Part II

Is it possible that, in Leviticus 19 too, the idiom אני יי or אני יי אלהיכם signifies a divine oath? Scholars have been reluctant to suggest this. Jacob Milgrom, in his commentary on Leviticus, comes close to this reading when he suggests, following Moshe Cassuto, that the recurring uses of the idiom in the law collection should be interpreted along the lines of Numbers 14:35: “ אני יי דיברתי אם לא זאת אעשה, I the Lord have spoken, thus I will do.” According to Milgrom, and I quote, “אני יי (אלוהיכם) is an abbreviated form of the statement that Yahweh has spoken and is certain to punish if his words are not fulfilled.” Semantically, this is quite close to saying that God swore to punish the violators of his commands. But neither Cassuto nor Milgrom go as far as explicitly saying that God is taking an oath. Walter Zimmerli in his commentary on Ezekiel hesitantly alludes to this possibility, when he notes in passing that immediately after Ezekiel 20:5 which we saw above, where Ezekiel explains that the idiom אני יי actually signifies God’s oath, we find in verse 7 some Leviticus-style commandments. However, even he refrains from making a full argument as to the exact meaning of the frequent recurrences of the idiom in the Leviticus law code.

It seems to me that scholars were hesitant to identify the uses of the idiom in Leviticus as an oath formula since they lacked a satisfactory explanation as to why an oath formula would be repeated in this manner throughout the law code. However, I believe that such an explanation is provided by the context of several biblical and other Ancient Near Eastern sources which clearly portray laws and commandments in terms of oaths. These oaths are presented in the form of conditional curses. Recall that every oath is essentially a conditional curse: it is undertaking to accept a divine punishment in the case that the sworn commitment is violated. Once we bear in mind that every oath is a conditional curse, it becomes evident that in many Ancient Near Eastern sources, laws are depicted as oaths. Let us now look at some examples of this phenomenon.

That laws were perceived as imposing a divine curse is attested to by another priestly source that was often compared with the Levitical law collection, that of the Šurpu incantations. These late-Babylonian texts, written in Akkadian, which were found in many copies from the 7th century, suggest a recipe for curing a sick person. The person who suffers from some sort of illness approaches a priest seeking a cure. The priest then recites the Šurpu incantation, which is accompanied by a fire ritual. The incantation is a prayer to the gods, calling them to remove the curse that has befallen the sick person. The phrasing of the incantation expresses the assumption that the illness is the result of a divine curse which has befallen the sick person due to the violation of some law. The sick person thus ought to confess his or her sin, to acknowledge the violation of the law and to ask for divine forgiveness. However, since he or she does not know which law exactly they violated, a whole list of laws is provided, a total of over 120 possible offences. These laws include both ritual laws such as eating prohibited food or otherwise showing disrespect for the gods, and civil laws such as trespassing, disinheritance of a child, cheating, theft, and so on. The Šurpu incantation presumes that the violation of any of these laws would automatically cause a curse to befall the violator. In other words, the law applies as a conditional curse; once it were violated a curse would result.

Another Mesopotamian text that clearly echoes this perception is none other than the stele of Hammurabi. In the epilogue to his list of laws, Hammurabi forewarns a future ruler against changing his laws or destroying the stele. The laws whose change is forbidden are given several titles, among them *awâtiya*, “my commandments,” *dīnī*, “my rules,” *uṣurātiya*, “what I have written,” but also *errētiya*, “my (threatened) curses,” and *errēt* *ilī*, “the curses (threatened) by the gods.” Thus, we read:

“If that man [the future ruler] has paid attention to the commandments that I have inscribed on this stone, and has not cast aside my rules, if he has not changed my commandments or emended what I have written, Shamash will surely make that man's rule last for as long as he has made mine last, the rule of the king of righteousness. He shall feed his flock in pastures of righteousness. If that man has not paid attention to the commandments that I have inscribed on this stone and if he has forgotten my threatened curses, and has shown no fear for the curses threatened by god, and if he has destroyed the rules I ordained and changed my commandments and emended what I have written, and if he has removed my name from the inscription and inscribed his own or has forced someone else to do it because of these threatened curses, almighty Anu, the father of the gods, the one who designated me to rule, will surely remove from him the splendour of sovereignty, whether that man is a king or a lord or a governor or a person appointed to some other function, and he will smash his staff and curse his destiny.”

Hammurabi thus blesses the future ruler who will maintain and keep the laws, and seeks to intimidate such a future ruler from altering the laws by threatening them with divine punishment. The threat continues with a very long list of plagues and troubles which will materialize if the laws are altered. However, what is of interest for us is the fact that the laws themselves, those whose preservation is required of the future ruler, are referred to as “my curses” (*errētia*) and “the curses of the Gods” (*errēt ilī*). The laws are conditional curses; in other words, they are imposed as oaths.

An Internal biblical parallel to the depiction of laws as conditional curses is found in Deuteronomy 27. During the renewal of the covenant in the plains of Moab, the Levites recite some commandments to the people. While the list of laws is rather short – only eleven commandments are recounted – what is important for our context is that each and every commandment recited by the Levites is presented as a conditional curse. To quote just a couple of examples, we read in verse 17: “Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor’s landmark”. And similarly, in verse 25: “Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.” Notably, these are not full-fledged curses but rather conditional curses, which are, in essence, oaths. In fact, in this specific text, the people submit themselves to the conditional curses, ratifying the oaths by answering Amen in response to each of commandments voiced by the Levites. The reply of Amen, needless to say, is a way of undertaking an oath as we read in numbers 5, in the case of the adulterous woman. [ “21 then let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse, and say to the woman) ‘the Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your thigh fall away and your body swell. 22 May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away.’ And the woman shall say, ‘Amen, Amen.’”]

Deuteronomy 27 thus provides an intra-biblical model in which each individual commandment is presented as an oath. While this is most explicit in Deuteronomy 27, other biblical sources ultimately demonstrate a similar supposition according to which each individual law is imposed as an oath. Thus, individual commandments are often called *‘edot* in the Bible, a plural noun derived from the Aramaic *‘dn*, the plural of the singular *‘di* in Aramaic, *ade* in Akkadian. The *ade* is a sworn covenant, basically – an oath. The plural *‘den* or *‘edot* are the plural *mitzvot*. In other words, each individual *mitzva* is an *‘adi*, an oath. The epilogue of the stele of Hammurabi, noted above, similarly describes the laws as *errētiya*, “my curses” in plural. Rather than providing a single general curse for violation of any one of the specific commandments, the stele makes it clear that each individual commandment is perceived as another conditional curse. One also needs to mention in this context that in Hittite documents, laws, including divine laws, are termed *ishiul*, which literally means an oath, and moreover, there are some documents which talk about the laws of the Gods as *ishiul* in the plural XXXX.

To conclude, the picture that emerges from the evidence presented above is that, in the Ancient Near East there was a prominent conception that laws were oaths. This was the case not only in treaty contexts, where an oath has substantiated the treaty, but also in law codes and documents that were not part of a treaty, like the code of Hammurabi. The Bible itself provides us with a format whereby laws are imposed as individual conditional curses – in Deuteronomy 27 – and regardless of the question of influence, I suggest that this is the format according to which the law collection in Leviticus is shaped.

As a final note, I would like to say a few words as to how the oath sworn by God becomes an oath imposed on the people to abide by God’s laws. Recall that according to the reading suggest by Cassuto and Milgrom, the idiom אני יי in this law collection should be read as an abbreviated version of what we read in Numbers 14:35: אני יי דיברתי אם לא זאת אעשה, “I, the Lord, have spoken.” What follows this announcement in Numbers 14 is the undertaking by God to punish the violators of his commandment. If we read the idiom אני יי in the Leviticus law collection in the same spirit, we can easily understand how God’s pledge to punish the violators of his commandments becomes a conditional curse imposed upon the hearers. The oath taken by God consequentially implies a conditional curse imposed on the addressees of the law, and the taking of an oath is made into an imposition of an oath. Thank you.