“Jealous” God

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Q: Why does God call himself “jealous” in Exodus 20:5? Isn’t jealousy a sin?

A: “Today, the word *jealous* has an almost totally negative connotation,” says linguist David Maas of Ambassador College in Big Sandy, Texas. “When people use *jealous* today they usually mean envious, but that is not the sole meaning of the word.”

According to a standard dictionary, the primary meaning of *jealous* is “very watchful or careful in guarding.” The secondary meaning is “envious.” A third meaning is “requiring exclusive loyalty.” To determine which entry applies to Exodus 20:5, we must look at the passage in context.

In Exodus 20 we read that God spoke the Ten Commandments. These commandments were the beginning of the covenant relationship he had with the people of Israel [under Moses].

The Lord often spoke of this covenant in terms of a marriage (Jeremiah 3:14). According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the Hebrew word *qanna*, translated jealous in Exodus 20:5, occurs only five times in the Old Testament. It is “used solely of God and in the context of idolatry. It shows the parallel between adultery and idolatry.

As a husband or wife rightly requires fidelity from a mate, God required the same from Israel. God expected Israel to keep the covenant, just as he would.

Certainly jealousy, when meaning envy, is a sin (Galatians 5:19–20). Of course, God envies no one. When God calls himself jealous he shows his watchfulness, care and loyalty toward his people.