The DECALOGUE

Living as the People of God

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WHAT IS THE DECALOGUE?

SHAPE

In spite of their historic significance, few young people in Britain today know what the Ten Commandments are, according to an article in *The Times* a few years ago. A follow-up letter revealed that one adult who claimed to know all ten of the commandments was quite confused about the numbering and thought that "Catholics, Protestants and Jews have different versions of the commandments."[1] So what exactly are the commandments, how does the numbering work, and how do the various traditions relate to each other?[2]

TEN COMMANDMENTS

The term *Ten Commandments* comes from a Hebrew expression that literally means "ten words." It occurs only three times in the Old Testament (Ex 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4) and is not attested again until the Greek writings of Philo and Josephus in the first century AD.[3] In the following century it appears in several Christian writings.[4] The English term *Ten Commandments* is rather misleading because the text is much more than a list of commands to obey. Many scholars prefer the term *Decalogue* (from the Greek for "ten

[1]Gledhill 2004; Lloyd 2004.

[2]The first four chapters and the final chapter of this book are adapted from three previously published articles of mine (Baker 2004; 2005a; 2005c) by permission of the publishers, all rights reserved.

[3]Philo, *Decalogue*; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.101.

[4]E.g., Epistle of Barnabas 15:1; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.12.8; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.16.3.

words"), and I use that in the remainder of this book. I hope to demonstrate that these ten "words" contain basic principles for the life of God's people in the Old Testament and that these principles are still relevant today.

The Decalogue is recorded twice in the Old Testament, in different contexts and with slightly different wording. The first is Exodus 20:1-21, where God speaks directly to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai after their exodus from Egypt. This is complemented by Deuteronomy 5:1-22, where the Decalogue is repeated as part of Moses' speech to the people before they enter the Promised Land.

Why ten? Does this number have any theological significance? Probably not. It may be a practical number for memorization: one for every finger. Or the number itself may be incidental, simply resulting from the fact that the matters of crucial importance included in the list happen to come to ten.[5]

While all agree that there are ten commandments, there are at least five different ways of numbering them (see table 1). None are exclusive to any one religious tradition, though some are predominantly followed by Protestants, Roman Catholics, or Jews. The differences occur at the beginning and end of the list, and there are three main issues.

First, at the beginning of the list, Exodus 20:2 is different in form from most of the following material, being a statement rather than a command. Some traditions treat it as a historical prologue (A, D), others as the introduction to the first commandment (B, E) or an independent commandment (C). I am inclined to the second possibility, taking it as the introduction to the first commandment. The form of the first commandment is then similar to that of the next four, all of which include an explanation mentioning "the LORD your God." God revealed himself to Israel when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and this revelation is the basis of his demand for exclusive worship.[6]

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[5]Nielsen (1965: 6-10) surveys various possible reasons for the number ten but is unable to come to a clear conclusion. Lang (2003; 2006) argues that in its present form the Decalogue actually has twelve commandments. In his view, there were originally five religious commandments (pentalogue) that were later supplemented with five nonreligious ones to make a decalogue, and this was then expanded further by adding the sabbath commandment and splitting the last commandment in two to make a dodecalogue.

[6]Cf. Judg 6:8-10; Ps 81:9-10; Hos 13:4. While I am inclined to the second possibility, the first and third are also plausible. We know that ancient treaties often began with a historical prologue, which might support the first possibility. Alternatively, the third possibility might be supported by the Hebrew term "ten words," which could accommodate a statement as the first "word." Biddle (2003) discusses the syntax of the commandments, arguing that they are actually all

Table 1. Alternative numbering structures

<table>
<tr><th>Content</th><th>A[i]</th><th>B[ii]</th><th>C[iii]</th><th>D[iv]</th><th>E[v]</th></tr>
<tr><td>"I am the LORD your God" (Ex 20:2)</td><td>Prologue</td><td rowspan="2">1</td><td>1</td><td>Prologue</td><td rowspan="3">1</td></tr>
<tr><td>No other gods (Ex 20:3)</td><td>1</td><td rowspan="2">2</td><td rowspan="2">1</td></tr>
<tr><td>No images (Ex 20:4-6)</td><td>2</td><td>2</td></tr>
<tr><td>No misusing God's name (Ex 20:7)</td><td>3</td><td>3</td><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>2</td></tr>
<tr><td>Remembering the sabbath (Ex 20:8-11)</td><td>4</td><td>4</td><td>4</td><td>3</td><td>3</td></tr>
<tr><td>Honoring parents (Ex 20:12)</td><td>5</td><td>5</td><td>5</td><td>4</td><td>4</td></tr>
<tr><td>No homicide (Ex 20:13)</td><td>6</td><td>6</td><td>6</td><td>5</td><td>5</td></tr>
<tr><td>No adultery (Ex 20:14)</td><td>7</td><td>7</td><td>7</td><td>6</td><td>6</td></tr>
<tr><td>No stealing (Ex 20:15)</td><td>8</td><td>8</td><td>8</td><td>7</td><td>7</td></tr>
<tr><td>No false witness (Ex 20:16)</td><td>9</td><td>9</td><td>9</td><td>8</td><td>8</td></tr>
<tr><td>No coveting a neighbor's house (Ex 20:17a)</td><td rowspan="2">10</td><td rowspan="2">10</td><td rowspan="2">10</td><td>9</td><td>9</td></tr>
<tr><td>No coveting a neighbor's wife (Ex 20:17b)</td><td>10</td><td>10</td></tr>
</table>

[i]Structure A appears to be the oldest, found in Philo (*Decalogue* 50-51), Josephus (*Antiquities* 3.91-92), and Origen (*Homily on Exodus* 8). It is common today in Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Reformed churches.

[ii]Structure B is only slightly different from A, and it is uncertain whether Philo and Josephus have A or B in mind since they do not discuss the introductory sentence. This structure is followed in some Jewish traditions (e.g., *Sifre Numbers* 112) and by the NRSV. The Exodus version of the Decalogue in BHS, BHQ, and RHB follows this structure except there is no division between the first and second commandments, so the total number is only nine.

[iii]Structure C is found in the Talmud and Targums as well as the Codex Vaticanus (Exodus) and is commonly used by modern Jews.

[iv]Structure D is found in the Peshitta as well as Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. It is common today in Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches.

[v]Structure E is found in some Masoretic texts and followed in several modern editions of the Hebrew Bible (BFBS; Koren Bible; see also Deuteronomy in BHS, BHQ, and RHB). For further discussion of numbering, see Weinfeld 1991: 86-87, 243-45; Houtman 1996: 3-5; Hakala 2014: 5-13.

Second, the prohibitions of having other gods (Ex 20:3) and making images (Ex 20:4-6) can be understood as two separate commandments (A, B) or just one (C, D, E). It seems to me the two prohibitions cover two distinct issues—gods and images—so they are better understood as separate commandments. On the one hand, it would be possible to worship other gods with or without images. Although images were common in ancient Near Eastern worship, the Nabateans worshiped their gods without them. On the other hand, the prohibition of images was not only concerned with worship of other gods, for it was quite possible to make images of the true

statements since there are no imperative verbs. However, this overlooks the fact that the Hebrew "imperative" is only used for positive commands and that negative commands are commonly expressed by the imperfect/jussive preceded by לֹא, as here.

God, as the Israelites did from time to time (e.g., Ex 32:1-5). These points will be discussed further below.

The third issue, which comes at the end of the list, concerns whether the prohibition of coveting is one commandment (A, B, C) or two (D, E). In my view, it is artificial to divide this commandment into two (at least in Exodus) since the repetition of the same verb makes a very close link between the two prohibitions. As will become clear in the detailed discussion below, the second prohibition is an elaboration of the first, not a separate commandment.

To conclude, the first and second ways of numbering the commandments (A, B) fit well with the content. They also have more support from ancient sources, as may be seen in the footnotes to table 1. The only difference between the two is at the beginning of the list, concerning whether the sentence "I am the LORD your God . . ." is a prologue to the Decalogue or part of the first commandment. I prefer the latter, as explained above, though it is not an important point. For almost all the commandments, this numbering coincides with that familiar to Orthodox and Reformed Christians as well as to Jews. Except for the first commandment, Roman Catholics and Lutherans will find the numbering here slightly different from what they are used to (e.g., their second commandment is counted as the third here).

TWO TABLETS

The biblical traditions are unanimous that the Decalogue was written on two stone tablets (Ex 31:18; 34:1, 4, 29; Deut 4:13; 5:22; 9:10-11). These tablets were inscribed on both sides (Ex 32:15) and kept in the ark of the covenant (Ex 25:16, 21; 40:20; Deut 10:1-5; 1 Kings 8:9; 2 Chron 5:10). The use of stone rather than clay may indicate the importance of this document and its intended permanence.[7]

It has generally been assumed the commandments were divided between the tablets, though Kline (1960) has argued the two tablets were identical copies of all ten commandments. This follows from his interpretation of the Decalogue as the text of a treaty between God and Israel, since it was conventional in the ancient Near East to make duplicate copies of a treaty document for the suzerain and vassal respectively.[8] If each tablet contained the

[7]Tigay 1996: 48. For further discussion of the material and possible dimensions of the tablets, see Millard 1994.

[8]See also Kline 1963: 13-26; Derby 1993b; cf. Collins 1992; Youngblood 1994. The suzerain was king of the more powerful nation, which would normally initiate a treaty, leaving the vassal king to

whole Decalogue, the ark of the covenant would be an appropriate place to deposit both God's copy and that of the people. However, while making duplicate copies and keeping them in separate places for security makes good sense, to make duplicates and keep them in the same place seems a rather pedantic imitation of the treaty-making procedure. To put God's copy in the ark would be logical because the ark is kept in the most holy place, but to also put the people's copy there would make it inaccessible to them and of little practical use.

So it is likely the ark contained one copy of the commandments engraved on two tablets. This may have been viewed as God's copy, with one or more accessible copies made for reference by the people and their leaders. There is no explicit record of such copies of the Decalogue being made, though Millard (2007) suggests that the "LORD's words and laws" mentioned in Exodus 24:3-4 are the Decalogue, written down by Moses to provide an accessible copy for the people since the original was to be kept in the ark. Later Moses instructs the people to set up stones on Mount Ebal inscribed with "all the words of this law" (Deut 27:2-4). This presumably refers to the laws of Deuteronomy 12–26 and may include the Decalogue too. The instruction is implemented by Joshua (Josh 8:32).

We do not know how the ten commandments were divided between the two tablets. Ancient documents tended to fill the space available in order to economize on writing materials, so the commandments may simply have been spread over the tablets in that way. But it is also possible they were divided into two groups according to content.

In subsequent usage, it has been common to see two groups of commandments in the Decalogue, one of four and the other of six. The first group concerns relationships with God and the second relationships with one's neighbor. This was suggested by Ambrosiaster and Augustine and followed by Calvin.[9] One attraction of this division is that it matches the two great commandments of loving God and loving one's neighbor (Lev 19:18; Deut 6:5; Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34).

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decide whether to accept or reject the proposed terms. On whether the Decalogue is to be understood as a treaty document, see "Treaty and Covenant" below.

[9] *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.8.12. This has been the traditional division in Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, though in their numbering the division is actually between the first three and last seven commandments. See also Nielsen 1965: 33-34; Durham 1987: 290.

Others see two groups of five commandments. This division appears to be older and is mentioned in Philo and Josephus.[10] In the first group, each commandment has one or more explanatory clause and always includes the phrase, "the LORD your God."[11] In the second group, the commandments are simple prohibitions and much briefer, though the last is somewhat extended. There is also a distinction in content between these two groups: the first concerns love for God and parents, while the second concerns love for other people. According to Ewald (1876: 160-62), the first group specifies duties owed by those who are inferior and dependent to their superiors, while the second group treats mutual duties between human beings.[12]

A key factor is the interpretation of the fifth commandment. Philo (*Decalogue* 106-7) believes it is placed on the borderline between the two groups because parents stand between the mortal and the immortal. On the one hand, parents are human and might be included in the category of people who are to be loved and protected, as in the following five commandments. On the other hand, they are partners with the Creator in bringing children into the world and are therefore to be honored as the Creator himself is honored.[13]

It follows that honoring parents is part of respect for God, not simply a matter of social relationships. There is more to filial piety than refraining from harming one's parents. Rather it is a fundamental virtue, expressed positively, that follows naturally from honoring God, his Name, and his Day. In Leviticus 19:2-4, honoring parents is closely integrated with honoring God and keeping the sabbath. Of course, this does mean that to harm a parent is a particularly serious crime and often leads to capital punishment (e.g., Ex 21:15, 17), but the emphasis in the Decalogue itself is on the positive aspect. The reward for keeping the fifth commandment is long life "in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Ex 20:12), complementing the introduction to the first commandment (Ex 20:2; Deut 5:6) and so making a frame (*inclusio*) to round off the first half of the Decalogue.

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[10]Philo, *Decalogue* 50; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.101. There are also other suggested divisions that I do not discuss here; on these, see Derby 1993a; Kratz 1994: 215-20; Jackson 1995: 1797-1802; Millard 2000; Motyer 2005: 215-20.

[11]Assuming Ex 20:2 (= Deut 5:6) to be part of the first commandment, as I have argued above.

[12]Weinfeld (1991) suggests that the former group is more distinctively Israelite, whereas the latter contains widely recognized principles (cf. Miller 2009: 168-74). This is partly true, but respecting the name of one's god and honoring one's parents were laws not unique to Israel, and the tenth commandment is by no means a widely recognized principle.

[13]Cf. Blidstein 1975: 1-8; Yisraeli 2009: 403-9.

To sum up, I believe the Decalogue consists of two groups of five commandments, one concerned with loving God and the other with loving one's neighbor. Honoring mother and father forms the conclusion to the first group rather than the introduction to the second. Whether the commandments were actually written on the two tablets in this way cannot be proved (unless one day someone finds the lost ark!).

Table 2. Two groups of commandments

Loving God	Loving Neighbor
1. No other gods	6. No homicide
2. No images	7. No adultery
3. No misusing God's name	8. No stealing
4. Remembering the sabbath	9. No false witness
5. Honoring parents	10. No coveting

IS THE ORDER SIGNIFICANT?

As we have seen, although the numbering of the commandments varies in different traditions, the order is quite stable. The main exception is that the sixth and seventh commandments are transposed in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), with the prohibition of adultery coming at the beginning of the second group. When Jesus refers to the commandments, adultery follows homicide in Matthew 19:18 and Mark 10:19 but precedes it in Luke 18:20.

It seems the Decalogue is ordered according to the seriousness of the offenses listed. Similar principles may be seen in other ancient Near Eastern laws, with priority given to matters that are considered more important. For example, some laws are ordered on the basis of socioeconomic status, dealing first with matters concerning the temple, then the state, free citizens, serfs, and slaves.[14] Philo (*Decalogue* 121), who follows the Greek order of the commandments by placing adultery before homicide, explains that adultery is at the beginning of the second group because it is the greatest of all offenses against fellow human beings. The same principle applies if we follow the more common order, which locates homicide at the beginning of the second group. There is a descending sequence in each group, beginning with the most serious matter and ending with something slightly

[14]Kaufman 1979: 115-18; 1987.

unexpected but nevertheless important: from apostasy to honoring parents, from killing to coveting.

To break a commandment in the first group generally leads to capital punishment (Ex 21:15, 17; 22:20; 31:14-15; Lev 20:9; 24:16; Deut 17:2-7; 19:11-13; 21:18-21). The punishment for making an image is not specified, but it is a very serious offense (Ex 20:5-6; 32:1-35; Deut 27:15) and would probably result in capital punishment too.

In the second group, only the sixth and seventh are capital offenses (Ex 21:12; Lev 20:10; 24:21; Deut 22:22-24). For the eighth and ninth, lesser punishments are decreed (Ex 22:1-4; Deut 19:16-21). The tenth is different in nature, for coveting concerns intention rather than action, and people could hardly be taken to court over it. However, the fact that it is included here is significant because it shows that people could be morally guilty before God without having committed any visible offense at all.[15]

On a slightly different matter, several scholars argue that the order of the Decalogue is the basis for the order of the laws in the central section of Deuteronomy, often called the Deuteronomic Laws (Deut 12–26).[16] This is an attractive idea but not entirely convincing. On the one hand, there are obvious links between Deuteronomy 12–13 and the first two commandments, Deuteronomy 15–16 and the fourth commandment, and Deuteronomy 19–21 and the sixth commandment. On the other hand, it is much more difficult to see a connection between Deuteronomy 14 (clean and unclean foods, tithes) and the third commandment (misuse of the divine name).

Many of the laws in Deuteronomy 12–26 explain and expand principles from the Decalogue, so it is not surprising if their order has been influenced by the order in which those principles appear in the Decalogue. However, it seems the editors of Deuteronomy had other considerations as well, for not all the relevant material is included at the expected place according to this scheme. For example, a group of laws concerning marriage

[15]Wright 2004: 291. Smith (1991) suggests a chiastic arrangement for the commandments in the form of an arch, with the prohibition against homicide at the apex, those against idolatry and coveting forming the two bases, and those in between making matching pairs. It may be true that the commandments concerning idolatry and coveting are parallel in meaning (cf. Col 3:5) and that there is an element of chiasm in this, but the rest is rather artificial. To make the structure work, Smith has to count just nine commandments (by making the first into a declaration of exclusive sovereignty after the pattern of ancient treaties), and this goes against the very strong tradition that there are ten.

[16]So Kaufman 1979; Braulik 1991; Olson 1994: 62-125; Biddle 2003; Walton 2012.

and sexuality (Deut 22:13–23:18; cf. seventh commandment) is followed by laws dealing with property (Deut 23:19-25; cf. eighth commandment). This fits the scheme, but the next chapter returns to marriage and divorce (Deut 24:1-5) before taking up property matters again (Deut 24:6, 10-15, 17-22). There is also a good deal of material that has little relevance to any part of the Decalogue (e.g., Deut 14; 17–18; 25–26). So the similarity between the order of laws in the Decalogue and the Deuteronomic Laws should not be overemphasized.

TREATY AND COVENANT

One final point about the shape of the Decalogue concerns whether it is formulated as a treaty document. In a classic article, Mendenhall (1954b) demonstrated that Old Testament covenants are formulated in a similar way to Hittite vassal treaties.[17] The key components of those treaties are now well known:

- preamble identifying the author of the treaty (suzerain)
- prologue recounting the history of relations between the two parties (suzerain and vassal)
- stipulations concerning obligations of the two parties (particularly the vassal)
- provision for a treaty document (deposited in a temple, with periodic public reading)
- list of witnesses (gods)
- curses and blessings on the vassal, threatening divine punishment for disloyalty and promising reward for loyalty

Many of these components are also found in Old Testament texts such as Exodus 19–24, Deuteronomy, and Joshua 24. It seems clear the writers use elements of the ancient treaty structure to express the idea of the covenant, and this is consistent with the fact that the same Hebrew word is used for both treaty and covenant. Nevertheless, the Israelite covenant is unique in forging a relationship between God and his worshipers. Moreover, it includes stipulations about both religious and social behavior, whereas the Hittite treaties tend to focus on military and security issues.

[17]See also Beyerlin 1961: 50-64; Baltzer 1964; McCarthy 1978. For examples of the treaties, see *COS*: 2.17-18.

Some treaty components are found in the Decalogue—for example, the historical prologue and stipulations—and this leads Kline (1963) to argue that the Decalogue is itself a treaty document. However, the prologue is very brief and the stipulations are much more wide ranging than the detailed commands of the Hittite treaties. There are no specific curse and blessing clauses, though the former is implied in Exodus 20:5b, 7b, and the latter in Exodus 20:6, 12b. Two key elements of the formulation are completely missing—namely, provision for a treaty document and list of witnesses.

Gerstenberger (1965a: 38) agrees that the ancient Near Eastern treaties used in diplomatic relations between states describe a covenant, a cordial agreement to promote peace and combat common enemies. Naturally stipulations are required for such an agreement, to specify conditions for continuance of the relationship, and the whole is protected by a curse. But Gerstenberger denies that the Ten Commandments are treaty stipulations in this sense. He rejects the view of Mendenhall (1954a: 39) that the covenant is made by God with each Israelite family, arguing instead that the treaty partner is the people of Israel. Further, he considers that the commandments are universal and timeless, reflecting the whole life of society and not bound to particular persons or nations. Thus Gerstenberger concludes that the Decalogue is not a treaty but a collection of moral precepts in the form of commands and prohibitions, as commonly found in the ancient Near East.

In conclusion, Old Testament accounts of the covenant between God and Israel are formulated in a way reminiscent of ancient Near Eastern treaties, but only some elements of the treaty formula are present in the Decalogue itself, while others are conspicuously absent. So the Decalogue expresses the essence of the covenant but is not a treaty document in itself.

FORM

As already mentioned, the Decalogue appears twice in the Old Testament, in two different versions. There are also two slightly different versions not present in the Old Testament. So how do these relate to each other, and can we trace an "original" form?

TWO CANONICAL VERSIONS

The Decalogue is first recorded in the book of Exodus, in the context of an extraordinary event at Mount Sinai two months after the Israelites escape from Egypt (Ex 19; 20:18-21). God appears to Moses and the people in a dense cloud accompanied by thunder and lightning, smoke and fire. They hear a loud trumpet blast, which grows louder and louder, and feel the whole mountain tremble violently. Finally they hear the voice of God (Ex 19:9; 20:1, 22). He identifies himself as their liberator from slavery in Egypt and sets out ten laws for life as the people of God (Ex 20:2-17). The record of this momentous occasion is immediately followed by a collection of laws known as the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:22–23:33), which develops many of the principles of the Decalogue and gives specific examples of how it should be applied.[1] After this the people confirm their acceptance of a

[1]Cf. Sprinkle 1994: 25-27; Tappy 2000; Propp 2006: 305-6; Williamson 2008: 113-14. Kratz (1994) examines the Decalogue in the literary context of Exodus and concludes that it is composed as an introduction to the Book of the Covenant. This confirms the close relationship between the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant, but the idea that the detailed laws are earlier than the summary goes against the entire biblical tradition of the origin of the Decalogue.

covenant relationship with God in a ceremony on the mountain (Ex 24). Later the importance of the Decalogue is reinforced by the breaking and remaking of the tablets (Ex 32–34).

Forty years later, the Decalogue is repeated at the beginning of Moses' second speech on the plains of Moab (Deut 5–11), which is separate from the main body of laws in Deuteronomy 12–26. This speech explains the meaning of God's covenant with his people, repeatedly reminding the Israelites of their liberation from Egypt, and provides an introduction to the laws. It is recalled that the Decalogue was originally given at Sinai (here referred to as Horeb), though that event is not recounted in detail here (Deut 5:2-5, 22-27). The themes of liberation and covenant are fundamental in both Exodus and Deuteronomy and provide the key to understanding the Decalogue in its biblical contexts.[2]

The content of the two versions is substantially the same, but there are differences in the details of the fourth, fifth, and tenth commandments.[3] Deuteronomy has several extra words and clauses, the theological basis for the sabbath is different in the two versions, and there are a few other small differences. Scholars have drawn various conclusions from these differences. For example, Stamm and Andrew (1967) believe Exodus preserves an older version of the Decalogue, though they consider the written form to be later than that in Deuteronomy because they connect the sabbath command with the Priestly account of creation. Hossfeld (1982) argues for the opposite view, maintaining that the version in Deuteronomy is original and has been reworked and incorporated into the Sinai narrative of Exodus by a postexilic redactor. This hypothesis has been widely refuted.[4] According to Weinfeld (1991), both versions are expansions of an original shorter form, though the account in Exodus is older. He admits there are some apparent Deuteronomic phrases in the Exodus version but argues that this does not prove it to be later, as they could have come from a northern decalogue, which he believes influenced Deuteronomic literature.

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[2]Wénin 1997: 12-20.

[3]For a synopsis of the texts, see below under the discussion of the commandments in question. A more detailed comparison of the two versions is provided by Charles 1926: xxxiv-xliv; Nielsen 1965: 35-44.

[4]Hossfeld's proposal is followed by Lang (1984) but rejected by many others (e.g., Levin 1985; Graupner 1987; 2000; Weinfeld 1991; Kratz 1994).

In my view, the Exodus version is earlier.[5] It is intrinsically more likely that extra material would have been added than original material omitted. Much of the extra material is characteristically Deuteronomic: for example, the phrases, "as the LORD your God has commanded you," and, "that it may go well with you."[6] The word *field* or *land* is a natural addition to the tenth commandment in view of the imminent prospect of settlement in Canaan (Deut 5:21). As a result of the additions, God's name (YHWH) occurs precisely ten times in the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue, which may well be deliberate.

TWO ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS

The Nash Papyrus was discovered in Egypt in 1902 and since then has been preserved in the Cambridge University Library. It contains the text of the Decalogue together with the Shema (Deut 6:4-5) and dates from the first or second century BC. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was the oldest extant manuscript of any part of the Hebrew Bible. However, although it is a very old manuscript, the form of the text appears to be a combination of that in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Presumably it is later than either and therefore does not provide an independent testimony to the original text. It is close to the Septuagint (Greek translation) of Exodus and may have been taken from the Hebrew text underlying that version.[7]

Yet another version of the Decalogue is found in the Samaritan Pentateuch.[8] It is probably later than that preserved in the Masoretic Text (standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament) and is characterized by harmonization of some of the differences between Exodus and Deuteronomy. The numbering of the commandments is slightly different from the five ways of numbering mentioned above, condensing all the usual content into just nine commandments. This leaves room for a distinctive Samaritan tenth

[5]Cf. Cassuto 1951: 250-51; Greenberg 1985: 91-96; Houtman 1996: 10-11; Jungbauer 2002: 9-17; Markl 2007: 209-17; Klingbeil 2010.

[6]Both phrases are used repeatedly in Deuteronomy; see Deut 1:41; 5:32-33; 6:17; 9:12, 16; 12:21 for "as the LORD your God has commanded you" and Deut 5:29, 33; 6:3, 18; 12:25, 28 for "that it may go well with you."

[7]Stamm and Andrew 1967: 13; Greenberg 1985: 94. Charles (1926: vii-xliv), writing not long after the discovery, transcribes and translates the text, and compares the three versions in detail, arguing that the Nash Papyrus agrees with LXX (Septuagint) in preference to all other authorities, and that it is closer to Deuteronomy but also makes use of Exodus. For a popular but up-to-date account of the papyrus, see Sweeney 2010.

[8]See Bowman 1977: 16-27; Greenberg 1985: 91-94.

commandment: a decree to build an altar and place stones inscribed with the law on Mount Gerizim.[9]

Both alternative versions of the Decalogue are ancient and of great interest, but they are probably later than those in the canon and give no reason to amend the traditional texts with which we are familiar.

CAN WE TRACE AN "ORIGINAL" FORM?

There have been many attempts to reconstruct the "original" form of the Decalogue. Ewald (1876: 159, 163) argues that if the additions and explanations found in Exodus and Deuteronomy are removed, we are left with two series of five laws that "exhibit perfectly that sharp clear brevity which every law ought to possess." It is "undoubtedly" these that were written on the two tablets, as follows:

I.

1. Thou shalt have no other God before me.
2. Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image.
3. Thou shalt not idly utter the name of Jahveh thy God.
4. Thou shalt remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother.

II.

1. Thou shalt not murder.
2. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
3. Thou shalt not steal.
4. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.
5. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.

Likewise Charles (1926: xliv-liv) believes that originally the ten commandments each consisted of one terse clause. He suggests the last one was even shorter than in Ewald's proposal—simply, "Thou shalt not covet." Sellin goes further in his reconstruction, arguing that the two positive commands were originally phrased negatively as prohibitions of work on the sabbath

[9]Cf. Deut 27:1-8. Several abbreviated forms of the Samaritan Decalogue have been found on inscriptions (Bowman 1977: 9-16).

and the cursing of parents.[10] Other scholars have made similar attempts and produced a variety of hypothetical "original" decalogues.[11] Weinfeld actually suggests three different reconstructions in two articles and a commentary.[12] On the other hand, Kratz rejects the reconstruction of a primitive Decalogue. He argues that the form in Exodus was composed for its literary context and that it included from the beginning most of those elements often considered to be expansions, though he admits the theological basis for the sabbath command may be secondary.[13]

There seem to be two issues: Was there an earlier ("original") form of the Decalogue, and—if so—can it be reconstructed? That there has been some development in the form of the Decalogue is clear from the different versions in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The most significant difference is in the theological basis for the sabbath command, and it could be that each tradition is adding an explanation to an earlier shorter form. Beyond this we move into the realm of speculation. On the one hand, the Decalogue in Exodus is presented as the direct words of God, and it may be questioned whether mere humans would dare to edit these. On the other hand, Cassuto (1951) argues that the author of Deuteronomy did not feel it inappropriate to do this very thing,[14] so there may also have been a process of editing that led to the form we now read in Exodus.

The striking difference in length and style between the first five commandments and the second five suggests that the former have been expanded, in which case there would once have been a shorter, simpler

[10]Sellin 1924: 83-84, followed by Alt 1934: 118-19; von Rad 1957: 191.

[11]Cf. Stamm and Andrew 1967: 18-22, 58; Nielsen 1965: 78-118; Cazelles 1969; Lemaire 1981; Harrelson 1997: 33-34. Rabast (1949: 35-38) argues that the Decalogue was originally worded metrically and was in fact a dodecalogue.

[12]Weinfeld 1985a: 12-14; 1985b: 6-8; 1991: 247-48. There are no cross-references between the three, so it is unclear which suggestion he considers most likely.

[13]Kratz 1994; cf. Graupner 2001. From a rather different perspective, Kline (1996) argues that the idea of "later expansive revisions" is incompatible with the understanding of the Decalogue as a treaty, for "treaties were not subject to revisionary tampering." Phillips (1983a), in contrast, argues that the examples of Deuteronomic and Priestly reinterpretation of the Decalogue show that the text was not sacrosanct but could be reworked to take account of new circumstances, just like other Hebrew law. Schunck (1984) believes that the ninth and tenth commandments were added in the eighth century BC as a response to the socioeconomic injustice at that time.

[14]He writes, "According to the customary literary usage followed both in the Bible and in the other literatures of the ancient East, when someone's utterance is cited it is related that someone else referred to it, the statement is not repeated in the *ipsissima verba*, but certain changes and variations are introduced," so "when Moses reminds the people of God's words, he does not repeat them exactly" (250-51). See also Markl 2013a: 22-24.

form. However, this cannot be proved, nor can we say exactly what that form was. In any case, there is no reason to assume the earliest form must have consisted of uniform, short sentences, all in the negative. Nor should we rule out the possibility that some of the explanations are original, included from the beginning because they seemed necessary to make the point clear. Ancient Near Eastern law codes are not always short and simple in form; they include explanations and expansions when required. Moreover, "no one in the climate of opinion in which the Jewish lawgiver lived could have commanded a people to serve only one God, to do so without images, and to afford a slave an equal opportunity with his master for a day's rest, without a threat or promise, or both, and a good reason to boot."[15]

So it is possible there was an earlier form of the Decalogue, simpler and shorter than the forms in the Bible. But it cannot be proved with certainty, nor is there is any way of establishing its exact wording. In any case, it is the texts of Exodus and Deuteronomy that have become canonical for Judaism and Christianity, and it is in this form that the Decalogue has had an unparalleled influence in world history.

OTHER SIMILAR TEXTS

Several other texts in the Old Testament show similarities to the Decalogue, and parallels can be found to almost all the individual commandments.[16] In the Pentateuch, Exodus 34:11-26 has sometimes been called a "ritual decalogue," and it focuses on observances related to worship, overlapping to some extent with the Decalogue (concerning, e.g., worship of one God, idolatry, and sabbath).[17] Leviticus 19 appears to be a reworking and expansion of the Decalogue related to specific cases, with eight of the ten commandments quoted or alluded to in Leviticus 19:4 (first and second commandment), 19:12 (third), 19:3b, 30 (fourth), 19:3a (fifth), 19:16 (sixth),

[15]Goldman 1956: 65-66; cf. Cassuto 1951: 237.

[16]Cf. Charles 1926: lix-lxiv; Wenham 1979: 264; Weinfeld 1985a: 4-9, 18-26; Weiss 1985; Harrelson 1997: 21-33; Rodd 2001: 82-85.

[17]Goethe (1773, according to Nielsen 1965: 13-15) and Wellhausen (1889: 85-96, 327-33) believed the "ritual decalogue" to be older than the "ethical decalogue" of Ex 20 and Deut 5, but these terms are misleading generalizations, and the dating is based on an evolutionary idea of Israel's history that has long been discredited (Gressmann 1913: 473-79; Alt 1934: 117n95; Durham 1987; Harrelson 1997: 28). Also, the division of commandments into ten in Ex 34 is uncertain; it could equally be considered a dodecalogue.

19:11, 13 (eighth), and 19:15-16 (ninth).[18] Deuteronomy 27:15-26 contains twelve curses that overlap in content with the Decalogue but differ in form and character.

The prophet Ezekiel has several lists of basic moral and religious obligations in his exposition of individual responsibility (Ezek 18:5-9, 10-17, 18), some of which are also found in the Decalogue (regarding, e.g., idolatry, adultery, and theft). Another list includes honoring parents, sabbath observance, homicide, and adultery (Ezek 22:6-12). Hosea and Jeremiah also make two brief lists of crimes, almost all of which are in the Decalogue (Hos 4:2; Jer 7:9). Two of the psalms set out ethical requirements for those who worship God (Ps 15; 24:3-4).[19]

These similarities are not surprising. The Decalogue is foundational for the life of Israel as a nation and has had an influence on the writing of other laws, prophecy, and liturgy. However, none of the texts mentioned is as comprehensive in scope as the Decalogue.

There are also similarities with a few ancient Near Eastern texts. The Sumerian Instructions of Shuruppak contain warnings about stealing, killing, and adultery.[20] The "Negative Confession" in the Egyptian Book of the Dead has clauses with similar content to the third, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth commandments, though the form is quite different from the Decalogue.[21] However, the similarities do not prove literary dependence on these ancient Near Eastern texts. The prohibition of homicide, adultery, theft, and the like is common in many cultures, and the parallels simply show that the Decalogue originated in a world that recognized a distinction between right and wrong in such basic areas of human life.

To sum up, while there are other texts in the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern literature that summarize desirable conduct and list specific sins to be avoided, there is nothing quite like the Decalogue.

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[18]The seventh commandment is mentioned in Lev 20, and there may be an allusion to the tenth in the command to love one's neighbor in Lev 19:18. On the relationship between the Decalogue and Lev 19, see Wenham 1979: 264; Weinfeld 1991: 250-53; Hartley 1992: 309-11; Milgrom 2000: 1600-1602.

[19]Cf. Ps 50:14-20; Is 33:14-16. Mowinckel (1927: 141-56; 1962: 177-80) describes these as "entry liturgies" for the covenant renewal festival that paved the way for the formation of the Decalogue, but Weinfeld (1985a: 25) rejects the comparison because they mention only "refined moral demands" and omit gross sins such as homicide, theft, and adultery.

[20]Lines 28-31, 33-34, 39-40 (*COS*: 1.176).

[21]Chapter 125 (*ANET*: 34-36; cf. *COS*: 2.12). Burney (1908: 350-52) also mentions an ancient Babylonian ritual formula that parallels the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments.

ORIGIN

As we have seen, the Decalogue is unique. There is no other ancient text comparable to it in the Bible or elsewhere. Its uniqueness, however, is not limited to matters of shape and form, but also extends to its origin and purpose.

MOSES AND THE DECALOGUE

According to Exodus and Deuteronomy as well as later tradition, Moses had a major role in imparting the Decalogue to Israel. Until the nineteenth century this was widely accepted by both Jews and Christians, but in more recent times it has been questioned. There have been three major stages in the discussion: pre–World War II, mid-twentieth century, and post-1970.

First, historical-critical scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first third of the twentieth century tended to reject the traditional view that the Decalogue originated in the time of Moses. This was argued by Wellhausen and followed by many who accepted his radical reconstruction of the history of Israel.[1] Several scholars suggested the Decalogue originated in the teaching of the eighth-century prophets,[2] though Wellhausen himself dated it later still and connected it with the Priestly tradition.

However, although most critical scholars accepted Wellhausen's reconstruction in general, not all agreed with his late dating of the Decalogue.[3]

[1]Wellhausen 1883: 392-93; 1889: 333; cf. Budde 1899: 31-33.
[2]E.g., Kuenen 1885: 244-45; Addis 1899.
[3]E.g., Gressmann 1913: 471-79.

Ewald (1876: 19-20) asserted, "There is no well-founded doubt that the Ten Commandments are derived from Moses, in their general import, their present order, and even in their peculiar language." Burney (1908: 350-52) referred to similarities with the Egyptian Book of the Dead as evidence that Moses was the promulgator of the Decalogue. And Charles (1926: xliv-lix) argued that in its earliest and tersest form it came from Moses and was presupposed by the Book of the Covenant.

During the mid-twentieth century there was a reversal of the trend to date the Decalogue late, and the majority of scholars argued for Mosaic origin.[4] For example, Rowley believed there was an even older "ritual decalogue," one going back to pre-Mosaic religion, that is preserved in Exodus 34. He suggested Moses was responsible—before God—for the issue of an ethical decalogue more in keeping with the new character of Yahwism as he mediated it to Israel. Mendenhall, contra Wellhausen, believed the tribal federation to be a conscious continuation of an earlier tradition going back to the time of Moses. They were bound by a covenant, the text of which was the Decalogue. Stamm and Andrew (1967: 39) surveyed various possibilities but preferred to ascribe the Decalogue to "that pre-eminent personality Moses, rather than to a later unknown author." Even Nielsen (1965: 139), who doubted the Decalogue derived from Moses, conceded that the "genuinely Mosaic tradition really did have an essential contribution to make to the *content* of the decalogue" (emphasis original).

On a slightly different tack, Beyerlin (1961: 145-46) argued that a primitive form of the Decalogue originated in the Mosaic period, but during the stay at Kadesh rather than at Sinai. Likewise Kapelrud (1964) concluded that the covenant and Decalogue originated at Kadesh, earlier than many other scholars supposed. While this may still seem relatively reassuring to those who hold on to the hope that the Decalogue is genuinely ancient, several questions remain unanswered. How was it in fact formed? Did Moses write it, and if not, who was the anonymous author of this extraordinary document? And why does the narrative claim it originated at Sinai if in fact it came from Kadesh?

Since 1970 the situation has changed once more, and widely differing views are now found among scholars on the dating of the Decalogue. For

[4]E.g., Buber 1946: 119-40; Cassuto 1951: 235-36; Rowley 1951; Mendenhall 1954a; Goldman 1956: 36-68.

example, according to Harrelson, "the Ten Commandments as a series are from Moses . . . a remarkable discovery of this founder of Israelite religion, and they underlie and sum up the very heart and center of Israel's religion."[5] Durham believes it impossible to establish a precise date for the origin of the Decalogue but is confident of "an earlier rather than a later dating."[6] Kratz dates the Decalogue much later—between the time of Hosea and the composition of Deuteronomy 5—while Graupner considers it a pre-Deuteronomic attempt to generalize and expand older laws.[7] Hossfeld believes the Decalogue to have been compiled in the same period as Deuteronomy (and only later inserted into Exodus) on the basis of Exodus 34:12-26, Hosea 4:2, and Jeremiah 7:9.[8] Different again, Houtman (1996: 9) thinks the Decalogue in its present form is from "the last period of the existence of ancient Israel as a nation," composed as a succinct statement of the basic rules underlying the covenant between God and his people.

Clearly there is no consensus. On the one hand, many scholars believe the Decalogue to be early, indeed one of the earliest parts of the Old Testament; on the other hand, there are various attempts to date the Decalogue much later. It is impossible here to evaluate all these views in detail.

One key issue is whether Moses was a historical figure at all. Some critical scholars today doubt this, and it must be admitted there is no way of proving Moses' historicity beyond question since the only evidence available is from the Old Testament traditions themselves. Nevertheless, this evidence is very strong and should not be dismissed unless there is stronger evidence to the contrary. Many other scholars still regard the traditions about Exodus and Sinai to have a basis in history.[9] This is expressed well by Bright (1981: 127) in his classic history of Israel:

> Moses . . . was, as the Bible portrays him, the great founder of Israel's faith. Attempts to reduce him are extremely unconvincing. The events of exodus and Sinai require a great personality behind them. And a faith as unique as Israel's demands a founder as surely as does Christianity—or Islam, for that matter. To deny that role to Moses would force us to posit another person of the same name!

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[5]Harrelson 1997: 35; cf. de Vaux 1971: 449.
[6]Durham 1987: 282; cf. Phillips 1984b; Greenberg 1985: esp. 110-11.
[7]Kratz 1994; Graupner 2001.
[8]Hossfeld 1982: 281-82, followed by Otto 1992.
[9]See de Vaux 1971: 327-472; Albright 1976; Coats 1988: 11-17; Beegle 1992; Davies 2004.

Assuming Moses did exist, it seems to me entirely probable that he was the one who imparted the Decalogue to the people he led—at least in its "original" form.[10] Otherwise, if Moses did not give the Decalogue to Israel, who was the unknown figure—presumably even greater than Moses—who was able and authorized to do this, and why is he or she not identified?

ISRAEL AND THE DECALOGUE

We have relatively little evidence concerning the subsequent use of the Decalogue in the life of the nation. Mowinckel (1927) proposed that ancient Israel held a New Year covenant renewal ceremony at which a summary of the law, including prototypes of the Decalogue, was proclaimed. He then argued that the present form of the Decalogue emerged in prophetic circles, probably among the disciples of Isaiah. Though not necessarily following this view of the origins of the Decalogue, many scholars have accepted the idea that it had a role in Israel's worship.[11]

Another influential view has been that of Gerstenberger (1965a; 1965b), who locates the life setting of the Decalogue among the extended family and the wise rather than the priests and prophets. He believes the commandments reflect everyday life. At the most basic level it is the father addressing the son, speaking from experience and with the sacred authority granted to elders within a clan. These rules for social conduct are in due course incorporated into the law, according to Gerstenberger, and become a prerequisite for acceptable worship, as in the entrance liturgies of the sanctuaries. Later, a representative sample of the commandments becomes the center of worship. These insights point to a much wider role for the Decalogue in society than simply in formal worship and could indicate an earlier origin than Gerstenberger assumes. According to the Bible, early Israel is an extended family, and Moses may be seen as a father figure, even though Abraham is the founding father of the nation. Indeed, God himself is sometimes portrayed as the Father of his people (Ex 4:22; Deut 14:1; Hos 11:1), though this is relatively rare.

In my view, it is an oversimplification to associate Old Testament law exclusively with any one group, whether priests (Wellhausen), prophets

[10]For more on the Decalogue's form, see the preceding chapter above.
[11]E.g., Stamm and Andrew 1967: 28-30; Childs 1974; Greenberg 1985: 114-16; Collins 1992.

(Mowinckel), or wisdom teachers (Gerstenberger). On the contrary, the Decalogue belongs to the whole nation—the people and their leaders.[12]

A good starting point for understanding the role of the Decalogue in Israel's life is given by Weinfeld (1991: 262-64). He proposes three major stages in the nation's use of the Decalogue:

- "At the dawn of Israelite history the Decalogue was promulgated in its original short form as the foundation scroll of the Israelite community, written on two stone tablets . . . placed in the Ark of the Covenant."
- The Decalogue was read in the sanctuaries at annual ceremonies to renew the covenant, probably at Pentecost (the festival traditionally connected with the giving of the law).
- In Second Temple times it was read daily together with the Shema.

In the light of the evidence available, this proposal seems reasonable. Bearing in mind the discussion above, I suggest two further points to supplement Weinfeld's outline:

- The Decalogue, or at least the principles it expresses, is assumed by the prophets and has a formative influence on the message they proclaim.
- The Decalogue provides guidelines for social conduct within the extended family, and these guidelines are implicit in the wisdom literature.

One matter worth mentioning briefly at this point is motives and sanctions. Laws are toothless without sanctions and ethics ineffectual unless people are motivated to follow them. So why should Israel obey the Decalogue? How is it to be enforced? The Decalogue itself does not stipulate penalties for infringement, and it is left to more detailed laws to do this. For example, all the requirements of the Decalogue are repeated and elaborated in the other law collections (except the prohibition of coveting, which by its very nature cannot be proved and punished). Many of these laws specify

[12]Cf. Durham 1987: 279-80. Freedman (2000) interprets the narrative from Exodus to 2 Kings in relation to the Decalogue, arguing that it contains a hidden pattern of commandment violations. In order to make it work, Freedman has to follow the unusual order of the sixth to eighth commandments found in Jeremiah (theft, homicide, adultery), claiming that Baruch was the Deuteronomic historian and so following this order. It is an ingenious theory with interesting insights along the way, but Rodd (2001: 82) demolishes it in a paragraph.

punishment, and the severity varies depending on the nature of the offense and circumstances in which it has been committed.

However, this leads to another point. Apart from the threat of punishment, which is common in ancient Near Eastern law, Old Testament law is distinctive in its inclusion of theological and ethical explanations. The simplest is the opening words of the Decalogue: "I am the LORD your God" (Ex 20:2). Similar words are used throughout the collection of laws in the second part of Leviticus, known as the Holiness Code (Lev 18–26). Some explanations are based in salvation history, especially calls to remember Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt, as in the Deuteronomic expansion of the fourth commandment (Deut 5:15; cf. Ex 22:21; 23:15; Lev 23:43). A theological basis is given for the prohibition of shedding human blood: "for in the image of God has God made mankind" (Gen 9:6). There are also ethical appeals, such as the prohibition of taking a millstone as security for debt, "because that would be taking a person's livelihood as security" (Deut 24:6; cf. Ex 23:8; Deut 25:3). On these explanations, von Rad (1957: 198) comments, "Jahweh wants obedience, admittedly; but he also wants men who assent inwardly as well. . . . Thus Deuteronomy, which makes a more earnest endeavor than any other code to explain the commandments . . . has the right to say 'very near to thee is the word, in thy mouth and in thine heart' (Deut 30:14)."

WORDS OF GOD

As we have seen above, scholars have debated for more than a century whether Moses wrote the Decalogue and have weighed the merits of various alternative theories. However, what has rarely been done is to consider the actual claims of the biblical text. Clines (1995) points out that the Bible claims God spoke the words of the Decalogue (Ex 20:1; Deut 5:22), but commentators do not take this claim seriously.[13] Instead, they say someone else spoke them, without acknowledging that this implies God did not do so (e.g.,

[13] An exception to this generalization is Nicholson (1977: 426), who recognizes that "the Decalogue, in contrast to other legislation in the Sinai narrative in Exodus, is presented as having been spoken directly by God to Israel rather than mediated through Moses" (cf. Phillips 1984a; 1984b). Nicholson believes the present position of the Decalogue is motivated by theological concerns, not merely editorial convenience. Deut 4 and 5 "attach both theological and apologetic significance to the direct transmission of the Decalogue to Israel at Horeb." Likewise, Ex 20:22 refers to God speaking from heaven to Israel to give the Decalogue, unlike Ex 19 where God speaks to Moses. Another exception is Miller (2004b). However, neither Nicholson nor Miller discuss the *actual* origin of the Decalogue and whether or not the biblical presentation is credible.

Hyatt). Or they change the subject and make the issue whether or not they were spoken by Moses (e.g., Charles). Or they imply the text never intended to mean that God actually spoke the words (e.g., Barr). Or they pretend God did actually speak the words, even though it is clear they do not believe it (e.g., Patrick). Clines himself prefers to take what the biblical text says seriously and therefore rejects its claim because he does not believe it to be true, arguing that it was formulated by people whose particular interests were served by its contents.

I also take the biblical text seriously and am intrigued by its extraordinary claims, so I will begin by clarifying exactly what claims are made before considering whether or not they are credible. Both Exodus and Deuteronomy repeatedly identify the Decalogue as words of God, spoken by him directly to the people (Ex 20:1, 22b; Deut 4:10, 12, 33, 36; 5:4, 22-27; 9:10b)[14] and written by him on tablets of stone (Ex 24:12; 31:18; 32:16; Deut 4:13; 5:22; 9:10; 10:1-4).[15] In contrast, Moses is the mediator for the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:22a; 21:1; 34:32), the Holiness Code (Lev 18:1; 19:1; etc.), and the Deuteronomic Laws (Deut 4:14; 6:1; 31:9, 24-26). He takes on this role in response to the request of the people themselves after their terrifying experience of hearing God speak (Ex 20:18-21; Deut 5:23-27). So there is undoubtedly something remarkable about the Decalogue from the perspective of the biblical narrative.

Apart from the narrative context, which claims divine origin for the Decalogue, the question arises whether the Decalogue itself is formulated as words of God. As it stands, the prologue and the first two commandments are expressed as divine speech using the first-person singular, while the following commandments refer to God in the third-person. Nielsen (1965: 128-30) suggests that the Decalogue was originally a collection of laws with references to God in the third person and that at a later stage in the tradition

[14]Cf. Deut 18:16. Deut 5:5 appears to say that Moses mediated the Decalogue, and this is interpreted by some as a relic of an older tradition which has been displaced by the direct, divine delivery of the commandments to the people and by others as a later harmonizing gloss, while a third view is that Deut 5:4-5 reflects two different but equally old traditions. Cf. Childs 1974: 351-60.

[15]It is not clear in Ex 34 whether the new copy of the Decalogue is written by God (Ex 34:1) or Moses (Ex 34:28). Cole (1973: 227) claims the narrator sees no conflict between the two, for they are alternative ways of describing the same events, and deduces that we should not interpret the phrases literally. Childs (1974) points out that Deut 10:1-4 refers to God writing the tablets and suggests that God should be understood as the subject of the verb in Ex 34:28 as well as in Ex 34:1. This is possible, though it is not the most natural reading in the context.

the third-person forms were changed to the first—appearing now as if it were a divine utterance, at least in the first part. However, while it is conceivable such a change could happen, it appears the use of the first person for direct speech in ancient Oriental languages is less consistent than in modern Western ones.[16] For example, God's self-revelation in Exodus 34:6-7 uses the third-person form, and the great king in the Hittite vassal treaties speaks of himself using both the first and the third person.[17] So the mixture of first- and third-person forms in the commandments does not conflict with the assertion of the narrative that all these words are spoken by God. Whether they are supposed to have been spoken directly or through a mediator cannot be determined from the text of the Decalogue itself.

In any case, is clear that the "ten words"—in a specific sense that does not apply to most other words in the Bible—are presented as the direct words of God. Undoubtedly such a presentation creates a problem for many readers today, especially in the Western world. What are we to make of it? On the one hand, Kline (1996) has no difficulty in taking the biblical account at face value. On the other, as already mentioned, Clines (1995) concludes that it is simply not true. As he has shown, there are various attempts to cloud the issue, to find a way of saying that these words come from God without him having to actually speak them. I will not attempt a philosophical argument about whether it is possible or likely that God spoke audibly from heaven and was heard by the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. However, from an exegetical perspective, it may be noted that comparable claims are made concerning three other momentous experiences in the history of God's people: Jesus' baptism (Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22) and transfiguration (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35), and Paul's conversion (Acts 9:4-7[18]).[19] Looking outside the Bible, rabbinic literature often refers to the *bat qol* (lit. "daughter of the

[16]Even modern languages are not always consistent; e.g., authors sometimes refer to themselves in the third person ("one") or first-person plural ("we").

[17]See *COS*: 2:17-18.

[18]Here it is stated that Paul's traveling companions heard the voice but did not see the speaker, while according to Paul's later retelling of the event his companions saw the light but did not hear the voice (Acts 22:9). It is arguable that inconsistencies like this are not surprising in trying to remember such an extraordinary and overwhelming event, and the differences between the two accounts tend to confirm its essential historicity, whereas identical testimony would more likely be invented.

[19]Visions in both the Old and New Testaments include voices from heaven (e.g., Is 6:3-8; Ezek 1:25, 28; Acts 10:13-15; Rev 4:1; 10:4, 8; 11:12; 14:13). But this is rather different from Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, where an audible voice from heaven is recorded in a historical context.

voice"; i.e., an echo), which seems to be a way of referring to divine speech without stating blatantly that God spoke audibly.[20] In modern times, there are many claims to similar phenomena, especially among people who have been converted to Christianity in a situation where reading the Bible or hearing the gospel is virtually impossible. Whatever we think about this, there seems to me no good reason for rejecting a priori the possibility that the biblical narratives are referring to real historical events. The authors and editors appear to have understood them as such.

The claim of the narrative that the words were not only spoken by God but also written by him on the tablets has no parallel elsewhere in the Bible, except perhaps the writing on the wall in Daniel 5 (described as being written by a human hand, apparently detached, that had been sent by God; Dan 5:5, 24). Most commentators do not even discuss the historicity of this point, and it seems to be assumed that it was in fact Moses or someone else who actually inscribed the tablets.[21] It is impossible to prove what really happened since there were no witnesses to the event apart from Moses himself. However, as in the case of God speaking from heaven, I see no reason to rule out the possibility that the text is recording a real event, perhaps using figurative language. That certainly seems to be what the writer(s) intended the readers to understand. And we should not assume ancient people were naive and unable to distinguish fact from fiction. It is well known that the Babylonians and Egyptians were capable of sophisticated mathematics and engineering, history and literature.

Modern Western disbelief in miracles is based on the assumption that God—if he exists—always acts predictably and according to the laws of nature. In contrast, most theology in the ancient world, as in much of the Eastern world today, allows for the possibility of occasional divine intervention in the routine life of this world. It seems Clines (1995) assumes the former view, and consistent with this he concludes that the Decalogue was not spoken by God. I tend toward the latter view, taking seriously the claim of the biblical text that the "ten words" are words of God in a unique sense, while leaving open the question of exactly how they were originally communicated.

It certainly is an extraordinary claim: the words of this text are the words of God! I am reminded of a story told about Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol:

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[20]See Strack and Billerbeck 1922: 125-34.

[21]There is ambiguity on this point in Ex 34, as mentioned above (see footnote 15).

> At the very start, when the maggid recited the verse from the Scriptures which he was going to expound, and began with the words "And God said" or "and God spoke," Rabbi Zusya was overcome with *ecstasy*, and screamed and gesticulated so wildly that he disturbed the peace of the round table and had to be taken out. And then he stood in the hall or in the woodshed, beat his hands against the walls and cried aloud, "And God *said*!"[22]

The Decalogue is unique in being ascribed to God. Unlike the Book of the Covenant, Holiness Code, and Deuteronomic Laws—for which the role of Moses as mediator is stressed—the Decalogue is presented as the direct words of God. However we understand this, I believe there is good reason to accept the biblical tradition that the Decalogue originated in the time of Moses and played a key part in the formation of Israel as a nation, indeed as the people of God.

[22]Miskotte 1963: 12.

PURPOSE

There is one further matter to clarify before moving into a study of the commandments themselves. What is the purpose of the Decalogue? To be more specific, who is it written for, and what is it designed to do for them?

LAWS FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Who is the author of the Decalogue addressing? There are three main answers to this question.

First, it has been suggested that the Decalogue is intended for *all people everywhere*. Westermann (1978: 21) describes the first commandment as an example of a command that applies "to everyone and for all time," unlike more specific commands such as Genesis 12:1. Similarly Cohen (1994) considers the Decalogue to present self-evident values to those sensitive to natural justice, a natural rule for human beings created as reflections of God.

A quite different answer is given by Phillips (1970), who argues that initially only free adult males were subject to Israelite criminal law, whereas in Deuteronomy women are considered equal members of the covenant community and are thus liable for breaching the law. Slaves and resident aliens also did not possess legal status, at least in earlier times. Because of this, Phillips believes the Decalogue is addressed to *free adult male Israelites*. Crüsemann (1983) takes this argument further, claiming the Decalogue applies only to adult men who are responsible for administering justice and active in worship, especially farmers who own land and citizens who own

slaves. He believes its main principle is to secure freedom for independent farmers and claims that this is why only certain laws are included, whereas other central features of Old Testament law and ethics are absent, such as taboo rules (e.g., clean/unclean, blood), cultic matters (e.g., sacrifices, festivals), economic and state matters, and rules for care of the weak in society. In a similar way, Clines (1995: 32-37)—while admitting that the authors of the Decalogue may have *intended* to address the whole community—argues that the text actually expresses the class interests of middle-aged, urban, property-owning males in Israelite society. Although other groups are mentioned incidentally (women, resident aliens, slaves), they are not addressed directly, nor are their interests and responsibilities the primary concern of the commandments.[1]

A third answer to the question about the audience of the Decalogue is that it is addressed to *all Israel*, the people of God.[2] Having said that, some scholars differ as to whether it is for Israel as a people or as individuals. Zimmerli (1975: 138) concludes his study of the Decalogue by stating that it is "addressed first and foremost to Israel as a nation . . . not . . . the individual." Weinfeld (1991: 249) disagrees, arguing that it applies to every individual in Israelite society, unlike other laws that depend on certain personal or social conditions. The Decalogue is formulated in the second-person singular, "as if directed personally to each and every member of the community," to avoid the possibility of individuals evading responsibility, which might happen if the command was addressed to a group.[3]

I will consider these views in turn. First, it is true that the principles enshrined in the Decalogue are relevant to all human beings in every culture and age, and many of them are also found in the laws and ethics of other nations. However, the context of the Decalogue makes it clear that these particular principles are imparted at a particular time to a particular people: the people of God, Israel. Also, some of the laws are quite distinctive to Israel—for instance, exclusive worship of one God, without images, and sabbath observance.

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[1]Cf. Block (2011: 30-33), who argues that, strictly speaking, the Decalogue is addressed to "individual male heads of households," but not for their own interests. Rather it is intended to restrain their tendency to abuse others, especially members of their own households and also neighbors.
[2]E.g., von Rad 1957: 195.
[3]As pointed out by Philo and Nahmanides; cf. Albeck 1985: 287-88.

The second view, which states that the Decalogue is addressed primarily to property-owning male Israelites, is also problematic. For example, Crüsemann's (1983) claim that central features of Old Testament law are absent from the Decalogue can be counteracted by pointing out that the first two features he mentions (taboo rules and cultic matters) are *not* in fact central in the context of the whole Old Testament, as proclaimed repeatedly by the prophets. Moreover, the latter two (economic matters and care for the weak) *are* referred to in the fourth, eighth, and tenth commandments. The one religious observance included in the Decalogue is the sabbath, which could be observed by everyone without expense, travel, or special equipment. In contrast, the pilgrimage festivals are not included, and these may well have been observed predominantly by property-owning male Israelites who had the resources and leisure to spend several weeks away from home journeying to the central sanctuary. Childs (1974) points to the simplicity with which the Decalogue is formulated, indicating that it is not addressed to a specific segment of the population but rather to the whole community. Likewise, McConville (2002a: 122) shows that—at least in its Deuteronomic form—the Decalogue "does not support a social structure in which a particular class has special rights or responsibilities," for this would be against the spirit of Deuteronomy that treats all members of God's people as equals (e.g., Deut 15:12-18; 17:14-18).

I believe the third view to be correct—the Decalogue is addressed to the whole people of God. This is surely implied in the biblical context of the Decalogue, where the words are spoken to "[all] the people" (Ex 20:18), "all Israel" (Deut 5:1), the "whole assembly" at Sinai (Deut 5:22). Elsewhere, women and children are specifically included among those who hear and are expected to obey the laws (Deut 29:10-13; 31:12-13; Josh 8:34-35; Neh 8:2; cf. Ezra 10:1; Jer 44:15, 20). Likewise, the Decalogue is for the people of God, both as individuals and as a community. The two are not mutually exclusive, for the actions of individuals affect the community and vice versa. The worship of one God, without images, and the observance of the sabbath would be matters of community policy, but the effectiveness of the policy would depend on the cooperation of individuals. Honoring God's name and one's parents—together with refraining from killing, adultery, stealing, and false testimony—would be primarily matters of individual behavior. Nevertheless, the community would be responsible for ensuring conformity, because the effects of misbehavior would affect the people as a whole. The use

of the singular *thou* is consistent with this, since it is used in the Old Testament to address individuals and also the people as a corporate entity.

THE CONSTITUTION OF ISRAEL

Another question concerns the nature of the Decalogue. What role is it intended to play in the life of Israel, as a people and as individuals? There are four main views.

Gressmann (1913: 477) is typical of scholars in the early part of the last century when he describes the Decalogue as the *Hebrew catechism* at the time of Moses. It was widely understood at that time to be a summary of the key points of Israelite religion, itemized so they could be counted on the fingers and easily memorized.[4] According to this view, it is intended primarily for teaching within the community of the people of God.

Phillips (1970; 1983a) believes the Decalogue constitutes *ancient Israel's criminal law*, enforced by means of capital punishment. He starts with the premise that the Old Testament concept of covenant is based on the Hittite treaty form, understanding God as suzerain and Israel as vassal. It follows that any breach in the stipulations amounts to apostasy and leads to divine action. A broken commandment could lead to punishment for both the individual offender and the whole community and might even result in a repudiation of Israel's covenant relationship with God. As a result, if an individual breaks a commandment, it is treated as an offense against the community—in other words, a crime. Following Greenberg (1960), Phillips argues that crimes in biblical law—unlike other ancient Near Eastern law—concern injury to God or a person, never property. Further, the penalty is always death, whereas this is not the case for offenses against property.

A third view is that the Decalogue itself is not primarily law but basic *moral and ethical principles* that deal with issues central to Israel's national life throughout her history.[5] This fits with the research of Mendenhall (1954a), who notes a distinction in ancient Near Eastern law between what he terms "policy" and "technique." The former is the sense of justice in a community, determined and enforced by the deity and accepted by the community as binding and functional as the source for law. The latter stipulates how community policy is translated into specific actions. So also in the Bible,

[4]E.g., Gunkel, according to Buber 1946: 130.
[5]Cf. Bailey 1963; Childs 1974; Biddle 2003.

the Decalogue is understood as a statement of the essentials of Old Testament ethics (i.e., policy), while detailed laws in the Book of the Covenant, Holiness Code, and Deuteronomic Laws explain how these principles are to be put into practice (i.e., technique). Unlike law collections such as Exodus 34 and Leviticus 19, the Decalogue is brief but complete: "he added nothing more" (Deut 5:22). The commandments reflect the essential nature of God and his relationship to his people, so the Decalogue may be described as "the essence of the Sinaitic covenant," "the quintessence of Old Testament law," the authoritative summary of God's will as expressed in the laws of Israel.[6] Philo and Muhammad are examples of those who have understood the Decalogue in this way.[7]

A fourth way of looking at the Decalogue is as the *constitution of Israel*.[8] That it is a central part of the process by which the nation is formed is suggested by the introduction to the first commandment: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt" (Ex 20:2). It provides theological and ethical guidelines for the people freed from Egyptian slavery, laying a foundation for the life of the liberated community that continues to be the standard for the people as they live together and order their lives for the common good.[9]

So is the Decalogue the Hebrew catechism, criminal law, ethical essentials, or the Israelite constitution?

It is true that those learning the Jewish and Christian faiths have often been expected to learn the Decalogue. But that does not make it a catechism. The Decalogue is not instruction for a person who has to demonstrate their readiness for membership into a religious community. Catechisms are usually formulated as statements of doctrine (third person) and confessions of faith (first person). But "the soul of the Decalogue" is in the word *Thou* (second person), as Buber (1946: 130) points out. Nothing is stated or confessed; instead, commands are given.

There is also some truth in the idea that the Decalogue is ancient Israel's criminal law, for the first seven offenses are crimes against God and society,

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[6]Kline 1996; Wenham 1978: 27; Graupner 2001.

[7]Greenberg 1985: 117; Houtman 1996: 7-8. For a survey of Jewish literature in which the Decalogue is viewed as a summary of the law, see Hakala 2014: 45-65.

[8]E.g., Volz 1932: 25; Buber 1946: 135-36; Houtman 1996: 7; Miller 2009: 6-7; cf. Huffmon 1995: 363-65. For a thorough study of the Decalogue understood as the constitution of God's people, see Markl 2007.

[9]McConville 2002a: 121; cf. Miller 1989; 2002; 2004b; 2004c.

and the penalty for these seven is generally death. However, there is a serious problem with this view: the last three commandments (traditionally understood) are not criminal law! Phillips (1970: 130-52) is aware of this and has a solution. He makes them fit by interpreting the eighth commandment as prohibition of kidnapping (i.e., stealing a person, as in Ex 21:16), limiting the ninth to false witness that leads to the death penalty (e.g., 1 Kings 21), and arguing that the tenth is concerned with protecting the status of community elders. However, these interpretations are quite unconvincing; at most Phillips shows that the first seven commandments are criminal law.

Closer to the mark is the view of the Decalogue as the essentials of Old Testament ethics. There are all sorts of laws in the Pentateuch, and the Decalogue provides an "executive summary" of the essential points for maintaining Israel's relationship with God. While all the laws express the divine will, these are the most important ethical principles, believed to be directly revealed by God and not to be diverged from in any circumstances.

However, in my opinion, the most helpful view is the last: the Decalogue is the Israelite constitution. It begins by stating the basis of Israel's special relationship with God and continues by listing her primary obligations in maintaining that relationship. These obligations include responsibilities toward both God and other people. While we should not draw too close a parallel with modern constitutions, in its biblical context the Decalogue is foundational for the national life of Israel. Its similarity in form to ancient Near Eastern treaties may also point in this direction.

Like the Magna Carta of Britain or the Pancasila ("five principles") of Indonesia, the Decalogue determines foundations for perpetuity. Younger nations often appreciate such foundations more than those who have long been free, and Old Testament Israel is no exception (Ps 19:7-10; 119). Far from being a dry legal document or a burden to bear, the Decalogue is a charter of freedom to be embraced and celebrated.

The Decalogue sets out ground rules for the people of God, covering both their relationships with God and others. The first five commandments concern religious and family matters that are of great importance for Israel and relate to its distinctiveness as a nation. Interestingly, these obligations do not include circumcision, considered so important by Jews in later days.[10]

[10]Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:10-27) and is referred to in several early narratives (Gen 21:4; 34:13-24; Ex 4:25-26; Josh 5:1-9). However, it is mentioned only briefly

The next four commandments express ethical principles that were widely accepted in the ancient world. The last commandment concerns thoughts and is presumably not intended to be enforced in a human court, though that does not make it any less important than the first nine. Clearly the Decalogue is not intended to satisfy the needs of law courts. "If this is a law code, it isn't written for people to look over their shoulders in case the magistrate sees them, but it is written to make people look up, in case God sees them, or look inside themselves because God is even interested in their thoughts."[11]

To put it another way, the Decalogue expresses the response that God expects from the people he has brought into being. It outlines a vision for the life of Israel after its liberation from Egypt. As such it is instrumental in forming the nation, and the principles it enshrines continue to provide an ethical basis for the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments.

in the laws (Ex 12:44-48; Lev 12:3) and nowhere else in the Old Testament except in a figurative sense (esp. concerning "circumcision of the heart"; e.g., Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6) and negatively in reference to non-Israelites who are described as "uncircumcised" (esp. the Philistines; e.g., Judg 14:3; Is 52:1).

[11]David Instone-Brewer, personal communication.