While much attention has been given recently to the legal battles from Alabama to Wisconsin over the presence of granite monuments and bronze plaques of the Decalogue on public property,¹ little attention has been given to world’s oldest Hebrew inscription of the Ten Commandments which turned up in New Mexico in the nineteenth century—a replica of which has yet to be made. This Decalogue was inscribed in Hebrew (using a quasi-Phoenician script) on the flat face of a large basalt boulder on a mesa now known as “Mystery Mountain” or “Hidden Mountain,” three miles west of Los Lunas. Given its antiquity, the monumental bolder is of some significance for early American history.

In 1949, Robert H. Pfeiffer of the Harvard University recognized that the inscription was an abbreviated form of the Decalogue; and since then a number of other scholars, including Harvard Professor Barry Fell (1976: 310), have confirmed the identification. My inspection of the inscription on site in 1983 and a comparison of the script used on the bolder Decalogue with other early Northwest Semitic scripts led me to conclude that the “Mystery Mountain” inscription is not just centuries old but could possibly be pre-Columbian or
even pre-Christian. The most compelling bit of evidence is
the unique shape of the letter \( Q \) \( (= \text{Qoph}) \) in the word יָדָדָם (\( יָדָדָם \) “to hallow it” (which is the fifth letter from the right on the fifth line). It was written as \( \Delta \), resembling a very angular number 8 in an English script. One would expect to find the Qoph written as

- • \( \mathfrak{Q} \) (Post-exilic Hebrew)
- • \( \Upsilon \) (Early Aramaic)
- • \( \Phi \) (Ahiram Sarcophagus)
- • \( \Upsilon \) (Moabite Stela)
- • \( \Upsilon \) (Nabatean inscriptions)
- • \( \Upsilon \) (Lachish Letters).

But the \( \Delta \) used for the Qoph has been found elsewhere only in the Phoenician script used in northern Spain from around 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. In addition to the unusual shape of the Qoph, the use of the consonants \( \mathfrak{N} \) (\( \text{Aleph} \)) and \( \mathfrak{N} \) (\( \text{He} \)) in the “Mystery Mountain” Decalogue as internal vowel letters parallels the use of these letters for internal vowels in other Phoenician inscriptions.

The content of the Decalogue in this Los Lunas inscription, aside from its being abbreviated and having several errors which suggest that it was inscribed from memory—like confusing the sound of the \( \mathfrak{Q} \) (qoph) the \( \mathfrak{K} \) (kaph) so that \( \mathfrak{S} \) (\( \text{šeker} \)) meaning “drunkenness” or \( \mathfrak{S} \) (\( \text{šakar} \)) meaning “hire, wages” was written for \( \mathfrak{S} \) (\( \text{šeqer} \)) “falsehood, lie”—varies little from the received Hebrew texts of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.
Although some scholars have conjectured that the “Mystery Mountain” Decalogue dates from Solomonic times, the odd shape of the letter Qoph precludes that possibility since that script is unattested that early. Others would date the inscription to the first century B.C.E., based upon a petroglyph of a sky-map allegedly depicting a solar eclipse that is said to have occurred on September 15, 107 B.C.E., which would have been the Rosh Hashanah of that year.

However, in my opinion, a more likely scenario to account for this Decalogue is that some “Crypto Jews” or Marranos—those Jews of Spain who converted to Christianity upon penalty of death but secretly practiced their Jewish faith—were among the Spaniards who reached New Mexico. Once in the New World, some Marranos separated themselves from their Spanish Christian comrades and established an isolated Jewish community on what became known as “Hidden Mountain.” An inscription of the Decalogue in ordinary Hebrew letters would have exposed their true religious identity and have subjected them to persecution or even execution. But by writing their Decalogue with rare and archaic Phoenician style letters, the “Mystery Mountain” Marranos attempted to hide their identity as practicing Jews.

If so, their security scheme failed them. Once recognized as Jews, the Marranos could have been wiped out like other Jews in the pogroms throughout Europe. On the other hand, a deadly disease could have caused the demise of the community. Either way, destroyed by a virus or by violence, the “Mystery Mountain” worshipers of Yahweh perished without a trace, save for their indestructible basalt Decalogue and assorted petroglyphs.
THE LOS LUNAS DECALOGUE

What makes the Los Lunas Decalogue important for the contemporary religio-political debate over the public display of the Ten Commandments is the obvious fact that the conspicuous display of the Decalogue at the base of the “Mystery Mountain” did not guarantee the survival of that religious community which, no doubt, lived obediently to Yahweh’s commandments.²

TRANSCRIPTION

אֲנָכיָ יְהוָה אלהים אֲשֶׁר יָיִן יָהַלְּלֵנִי [מצה]
לא יהי אלהים אָחָד עַל פָּנָיו
יְמִה מְנַחֵט עַבְרֵים הַלָּא חָמֵשָׁה לְךָ פֶּסַל: הַלָּא חָמֵשָׁה
[אני] שֶם יְהוָה לְשֵׁם: יְאָכַל אַתָּה וַיָּמֶל
הַשָּׁמֶן לְכָרָשָׁה: כְּבָר אַתָּה אֶפֶבֶר אַתָּה אַמֶּר לְעָמִיל
[אני] אָכַל מִדָּרֶךְ עַל חֵצֶרֶךְ אֶתָּה יְהוָה אלהים
נֵתָר לְךָ: הַלָּא חָרִזָה הַלָּא חָמֵשָׁה: הַלָּא חָמֵשָׁה
הַשָּׁמֶן בְּרֵעוּר עַל שְׁכָר: הַלָּא הָמוּר אַתָּה רֻכָּב
וֹלָכָּל אַשְּרָה לְרַעְשָׁה

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Granite monuments and bronze plaques of Ten Commandments were donated to many municipalities across America in the 1950s and 1960s by the Fraternal Order of Eagles, with the support and sponsorship of Cecil B. DeMille who wrote
from Mount Sinai while filming on site *The Ten Commandments*,

. . . we need the Divine Code of Guidance which was
given to the world. That is why I am so enthusiastic about
the Fraternal Order of Eagles’ project of circulating and
erecting copies of the Ten Commandments everywhere the
Order’s widespread influence reaches.

2. A number of short studies on the “Myster Mountain Decalogue” are available on the Internet, including those of

- J. Huston McCulloch
  http://economics.sbs.ohio-state.edu/jhm/arch/loslunas.
  html
- Juergen Neuhoff
  http://www.webcom.com/mhc/archaeology/decalogue-
  introduction.html
- James D. Tabor
  http://www.unitedisrael.org/loslunas.html

3. This line is an insertion, marked by the indicator ▲, to
correct the mistake of omitting the words between the
asterisks after the original second line was inscribed. The MT

appears as יְדֵי in the inscription, with the ה apparently
used as an internal vowel letter for א (see next note).

4. The MT רְאוֹאֵל “watch, keep, guard” of Deut 5:12 appears
in Exo20:8 as יְדֵי רְאוֹאֵל “remember.” The equivalent of the MT

appears as רְאוֹאֵל in the inscription, with the ש apparently
used also as an internal vowel letter for א. Other
examples of ש and ה being used as vowel letters in Phoe-
nician are cited by Friedrich and Röllig (1970: 44 §108).
THE LOS LUNAS DECALOGUE

5. The MT לֶמַל “in order that” appears as לָמַל “to from above” or “to act unfaithfully” in the inscription, which is an obvious error by the inscriber.

6. The MT שָׁבְר “emptiness, vanity” appears as שָׁבְר “hire, wages, reward” in the inscription, which is apparently an error for שָׁבְר “lie, deception, falsehood.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


