

**THE LOS LUNAS, NEW MEXICO,  
DECALOGUE**

**Exodus 20:2–17**

**Deuteronomy 5:6–21**

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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,<sup>1</sup> 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* (= *Qoph*) in the word לְקַדְּשׁוּ (lĕqaddēšō) “to hallow it” (which is the fifth letter from the right on the fifth line). It was written as Δ̄, resembling a very angular number 8 in an English script. One would expect to find the *Qoph* written as

- ק (Post-exilic Hebrew)
- 𐤒 (Early Aramaic)
- 𐤒 (Ahiram Sarcophagus)
- 𐤒 (Moabite Stela)
- 𐤒 (Nabatean inscriptions)
- 𐤒 (Lachish Letters).

But the Δ̄ 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 א (ʿAleph) and ה (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 ק (*qoph*) the כ (*kaph*) so that שכר (*šeker*) meaning “drunkenness” or סכר (*šakar*) meaning “hire, wages” was written for שקר (*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.

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.<sup>2</sup>

#### TRANSCRIPTION

אנכי יהוה אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ [מצר]  
 \* לא יהיה אלהים אחרים על פהני \*  
 ים מבית עבדים<sup>3</sup> לא תעשה לך פסל : לא תשא  
 [א]ת שם יהוה לשוא : זאכור<sup>4</sup> את יום  
 השבת לקדשו : כבד את אביך ואת אמך למעל<sup>5</sup>  
 [י]ארכון ימך על האדמה אשר יהוה אלהיך  
 נתן לך : לא תרצח לא תנאף : לא תגנב : לא  
 תענה ברעך עד שכר<sup>6</sup> : לא תחמד אשת רעך  
 וכל אשר לרעך

#### 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  $\Delta$ , to correct the mistake of omitting the words between the asterisks after the original second line was inscribed. The MT פִּנִּי appears as פִּהֲנִי in the inscription, with the ה apparently used as an internal vowel letter for ā (see next note).

4. The MT שָׁמֹר “watch, keep, guard” of Deut 5:12 appears in Exo20:8 as זָכֹר “remember.” The equivalent of the MT זָכֹר appears as זֶאכֹר in the inscription, with the א apparently used also as an internal vowel letter for ā. Other examples of א and ה being used as vowel letters in Phoenician are cited by Friedrich and Röllig (1970: 44 §108).

5. The MT לְמַעַן “in order that” appears as לְמַעַל “to from above” or “to act unfaithfully” in the inscription, which is an obvious error by the inscriber.
6. The MT שׁוֹן “emptiness, vanity” appears as שְׂכָר “hire, wages, reward” in the inscription, which is apparently an error for שֶׁקֶר “lie, deception, falsehood.”

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