

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

by

THOMAS F. MCDANIEL

Professor Emeritus

The Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Wynnewood, Pennsylvania 19096

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INTRODUCTION

Any mention of the Decalogue during the last half of the twentieth century would have triggered recollections of Cecil B. DeMille's 220 minute movie, *The Ten Commandments*, filmed in 1956, featuring Charlton Heston (as Moses), Yul Brynner (as Ramases) and Anne Baxter (as Nefretiri). Some older Americans remember when Ten Commandments granite monuments were donated to many municipalities across America in the 1950s and 1960s by the Fraternal Order of Eagles, with the support and sponsorship of Cecile B. DeMille, who wrote from Mount Sinai while filming on site, ". . . 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."¹

But the gifts of those Ten Commandments monuments erected mid-century on public property and courthouse lawns became, by the end of the century, the basis for lawsuits and legal battles. Any mention of the Ten Commandments now, at the start of the twenty-first century, triggers a religio-political debate about the display of the Decalogue on government or public properties. The best example of this happened on August 1, 2001, when attention shifted from Hollywood and DeMille's film being available on DVD to the Alabama State Judicial Building in Montgomery, Alabama, where the Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore had authorized the placement of a 5,280 pound granite monument of the Ten Commandments in the building's rotunda. Two months later, on October 31, 2001, two lawsuits seeking the removal of the monument were filed against Chief Justice Moore by plaintiffs who were represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the Southern Poverty Law Center. A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit ruled unanimously against Chief Justice Moore, resulting in Moore's suspension from office on

August 22, 2003. The massive monument was removed from the rotunda on November 14, 2003 and placed in storage. The fate of Justice Moore seems now to rest with the Alabama electorate, if not with the United States Supreme Court. And the fate of the monument rests ultimately with the men whose names were chisled into the granite at its copyright sign: Justice Roy Moore and the sculptor of the monument, Richard Hahnemann, along with Moore's attorney, Stephen Melchoir.

While much attention in the media has been given to the legal battles in cities and counties of Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin over the presence of monuments and plaques of the Decalogue on public property, 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. The Decalogue was inscribed in Hebrew (using a quasi-Phoenician script)² on the flat face of a large basalt boulder on a mesa now known as "Mystery Mountain" and "Hidden Mountain," three miles west of Los Lunas. Given its antiquity, the monumental boulder is of some significance for early American history and photographs of it should at least be in American History textbooks, if not replicas of it in schools or on courthouse lawns.³ In 1949, Robert H. Pfeiffer of Harvard University recognized that the inscription was an abbreviated form of the Decalogue; and since then a number of other scholars have confirmed the identification.⁴

My inspection of the inscription on site in 1983 and a comparison of script used on the boulder 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 (l^hqaddēšō) "to hallow it" (which is the fifth letter from the right on the fifth line). It was written as , resembling a very angular number 8 in our English scripts. One would expect to find the *Qoph* written as  (post-exilic Hebrew), as  (Early Aramaic),  (Ahiim Sarcophagus),  (Moabite Stela),  (Nabatean inscriptions), and  (Lachish Letters). But the  used for the *qoph* has been found elsewhere only in the Phoenician script used in northern Spain from around 200 B. C. to 200 A. D. In addition to the unusual shape of the letter *qoph*, the use of the

consonants א (*aleph*) and ה (*hē*) in the “Mystery Mountain” Decalogue as internal vowel letters parallels the use of these letters for internal vowels in other Phoenician inscriptions.⁵

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 a ק (*qoph*) with the sound of a כ (*kaph*) so that שכר (*šeker*) “drunkenness” or (šakar) “hire, wages” was written for שקר (*šeqer*) “falsehood, lie”—varies little from the received Hebrew texts of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

Although there has been some wild conjectures that the “Mystery Mountain” Decalogue dates from Solomonic times, allegedly proving some Israelites among the Phoenicians who crossed the Atlantic three thousand years ago, the odd shape of the letter *qoph* precludes that possibility since the particular script with the Δ̄ for the Q was not that old. Others would date the inscription to the first century B.C.E., based upon a petroglyph of a sky-map depicting a solar eclipse which is said to have occurred on September 15, 107 B.C.E., which would have been the Rosh Hashanah of that year. In my opinion, a much more likely scenario to account for this Decalogue is that some Marranos—the name given to Jews of Spain who had converted to Christianity upon penalty of death but secretly continued to practice their Jewish faith—were among the Spaniards who reached (New) Mexico. Once in the New World, the Marranos could easily have separated themselves from their Spanish Christian comrades and established their own isolated Jewish community on what became known as “Hidden Mountain.” An inscription of the Decalogue in ordinary recognizable Hebrew letters would have exposed their true identity and have subjected them to persecution or execution. But by writing their Decalogue with rare and archaic Phoenician style letters, “Mystery Mountain” Marranos were not likely to have been recognized as practicing Jews. If this were the case, their security scheme probably have failed them. Once recognized as practicing Jews, the Marranos could have been wiped out like those slain in the carnage of the anti-Jewish riots in Cordoba, Spain, in March 1473. On the otherhand, it may have simply been a deadly disease that caused the demise of the community. Either way, destroyed by a virus or by

violence the “Mystery Mountain” worshippers of Yahweh perished without a trace, save for their indestructible basalt Decalogue and petroglyphs.

What makes the Los Lunas Decalogue important for the contemporary religio-political debate over the public display of the Ten Commandments is the fact that the conspicuous display of the Decalogue at the base of the “Mystery Mountain” did not guarantee the survival of the religious community there which probably lived obediently to Yahweh’s commandments.

Different Ways to Number the Commandments

Sixteen verbs in the Decalogue of Exod 20:1–17 have an imperative force, whereas in Deut 5:6-21 there are seventeen such verbs. Different Christian and Jewish traditions reflect several ways to divide these verbs with imperative force so as to come up with exactly ten commandments or ten “words,” as they were so designated in Exod 20:1 and Deut 4:13. The rabbinic tradition recognized “I am Yahweh your God” (a verbless statement in Hebrew) as the first of the ten words and then listed and clustered the sixteen or seventeen verbs in such a way to end up with exactly ten commandments. As a result, the commands not to covet a neighbor’s wife and not to covet anything of one’s neighbor were made into the single tenth commandment. But Roman Catholic and Lutheran tradition followed Origin, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine who joined together “You shall have no other gods before me” and “You shall not make for yourself a graven image” to make the first of the ten commandments. As a result, the prohibition about coveting a neighbor’s wife was separated from the one about coveting a neighbor’s property, making them commandments nine and ten, respectively. Orthodox, Protestant, and Reformed traditions recognized “I am Yahweh your God” as an introductory statement and made “You shall have no other gods” the first commandment, with the prohibition of graven images becoming the second commandment. And, as in the rabbinic tradition, the two prohibitions about coveting were joined together to form the tenth commandment. In terms of the religio-political debate over the display of the Ten Commandments in America, even the way the commandments are numbered on plaques and monuments is a significant indicator of which theological tradition or institution is recognized as normative and authoritative.

The seven words of Exod 20:1, “And God spoke all these words, saying” is in Christian tradition an editorial introduction to the entire Decalogue which follows in 20:2–17. The Decalogue itself was an independent literary unit that was inserted into the middle of a separate theophany narrative, now found in the divided texts of Exod 19:7–25 and 20:18–26. The Decalogue is presented as having been spoken directly by God to the Israelites (who were addressed by the collective singular pronoun “you,” as in the *Shema* of Deut 6:5), *without* Moses being a mediator. Thus, the Decalogue in the Book of Exodus became revered as a direct revelation from Yahweh to the Israelites. They heard Yahweh speak but did not die! But, according to the twenty-eight verses of theophany narrative into which the Decalogue was inserted, Yahweh wanted the people of Israel to hear him but without their seeing him, saying, “Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak with you” (Exod 19:9). However, the Israelites were so fearful of actually hearing Yahweh (“let not God speak to us, lest we die”) that Yahweh reversed himself and made Moses the mediator who would convey the divine words to the fearful tribes (Exod 20:20–22).

In Deut 5:4–5, when Moses on the slopes of Pisgah repeated the Decalogue given at Mount Horeb/Mount Sinai, the Deuteronomist conflated the Exodus 20 variants by having (1) Yahweh speak to the Israelites directly (“Yahweh spoke with you face to face at the mountain out of the midst of the fire”) and (2) by having Moses mediating the message (“I stood between Yahweh and you at that time to declare to you the word of Yahweh”). For the Israelites the hearing of Yahweh’s voice once was enough. The tribal chiefs and elders acknowledged “we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire, we have this day seen God speak with people and the people still live.” But, terrified that additional hearings of God’s voice could be fatal, they petitioned Moses, “Hear all that Yahweh our God will say; and speak to us all that Yahweh our God will speak to you; and we will hear and do it” (Deut 5:23–27).

Jewish tradition notwithstanding, the identical words in Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6, “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” serve as the prologue to the entire Decalogue. Anthony Phillips (1970: 3–11; 2002:2–24) and a number of

other scholars have recognized that this brief prologue parallels the use in Hittite suzerainty treaties of a historical prologue proclaiming the suzerain's prior achievements before the enumeration of the treaty stipulations placed upon the vassals. When Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6 are read in a similar manner—as the prologue to the entire Decalogue—it precludes isolating the verse as the introduction to the first prohibition only.

The Decalogue and the Death Penalty

Anthony Phillips (1970: 1, 10–12; 2002: 2–24) presented the case for the Decalogue's having been Israel's criminal law code, over against her civil code, arguing that, "From the point of view of Yahweh, the Decalogue was Israel's constitution, and any breach of it amounted to an act of apostasy which could lead to divine action against the individual offender and the community." In order for the community to protect itself from divine judgment it was necessary for the community to convict the guilty one, who could no longer remain a member of the community. While banishment from Israel was a theoretical option, the practical solution implicit in the Decalogue and explicit in parallel texts called for the immediate execution of the guilty party. Phillips concluded that the death penalty was applied only for a violation of the Decalogue.

Moshe Weinfeld (1991: 248), in disagreement with Phillips, asserted "the commandments are not intended to be concrete legislation, rather a formulation of conditions for membership in the community. Anyone who does not observe these commandments excludes himself from the community of the faithful." Ronald Clements (1994: 328–329), in agreement with Weinfeld and in obvious disagreement with Phillips, stated that "exclusion from the covenant community would be the inevitable and appropriate punishment" for any violation of the Decalogue. Clements concluded, "The attempt to elevate all ten of the commandments to cover capital crimes involving the death penalty must be set aside as highly implausible."

But what seemed "implausible" for Clements was essential for the Deuteronomist. The death penalty was clearly stipulated for nine identical criminal offenses cited in the Book of the Covenant (Exod 21:12–22:16) and elsewhere in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Sixteen canonical texts,

one deuterocanonical text, and an extra-biblical passage (cited below under each commandment, respectively) support the claim that the Decalogue's focus was definitely on capital crimes, much like the deadly curses pronounced in Deut 28:20–27. The other laws dealing with identical criminal offenses would have to be either subsequent reiterations based on the Decalogue or earlier statutes about capital crimes which eventuated into the Decalogue.

In these sixteen canonical texts, only three of them specify death by stoning. The stoning would have been done by all the men of the community, with perhaps the prosecuting witnesses initiating the stoning. Phillips (1970: 24) noted stoning was the preferred method of execution because it required the full participation of all members of the community, "and so both individually and corporately propitiate Yahweh" (1970: 24).

Another reason may well go back to the covenant with Noah where it was stipulated, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9:6). Whereas a single executioner would himself become guilty of killing another person in the act of executing a criminal, no one person could be held responsible for the death of a criminal from a communal stoning, for it was impossible to determine which particular stone or stone-thrower actually caused the victim's death. (An analogy would be execution by a firing squad when one of the rifles fires only a blank; but those who shoot do not know which rifle had the blank, thereby precluding any individual soldier being held accountable for a killing.)

However, it cannot be assumed that death by stoning was always the method of execution. In Exod 19:12–13, it was stated that "any who touch the mountain [Sinai] shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot; whether animal or human being, they shall not live." According to Exod 32:27, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law and learned that the Israelites had worshiped the golden calf, he quoted God as saying, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your kith, and your kin.'" In obedience the Levites killed about three thousand kinsmen that day, after which Moses announced, "Today you have ordained yourselves for

the service of Yahweh, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day.” The blessing and the ordination of the Levites upon the slaughtering of their kinfolk initiated, idealized, and institutionalized the zealots’ motto: “Death to the infidels!” Thus, it is quite clear that, be it either pre-Decalogue or post-Decalogue, the execution of infidels was carried out by several methods: stone them; shoot them; stab them—just so they die—the covenant with Noah notwithstanding.

Recognition that the Decalogue was Israel’s code of capital offenses came not only from post- enlightenment scholars, but it was so recognized by others like William Cowper (1731-1768) who penned the following lines (from H. S. Milford, *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, London: Oxford, 1971, 42–43),

Marshaling all his terrors as he came;
Thunder, and earthquake, and devouring flame;
From Sinai's top Jehovah gave the law –
Life for obedience – death for ev'ry flaw.
When the great Sov'reign would his will express,
He gives a perfect rule; what can he less?
And guards it with a sanction as severe
As vengeance can inflict, or sinners fear.

“Truth” 547–554

Death to infidels for violating the commandments of Tablet One, and death to criminals for violating the laws of Tablet Two became normative and routine, with most executions being so insignificant they warranted no historical notice. The stoning of the nameless woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–9) would have taken place without any historical record had it not been for the attempt of the scribes and Pharisees to have Jesus come to the woman’s defense and thereby have Jesus contradict Moses—then they could have stoned Jesus along with the adulteress. Similarly, Stephen’s being stoned as an infidel (Acts 7:54–8:3; 9:1–2) was just routine business for Saul of Tarsus who, having consented to Stephen’s death, proceeded “to lay waste to the church, and entering house after house he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison, . . . still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” The number of and the names of Saul’s victims, aside from Stephen, were not worth any historical recognition or record.

The infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (“The Witches’ Hammer”), published in 1486 by the Dominican monks Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, became the vilest written extension of the Decalogue’s unwritten demand for the death of infidels. The document was a manual of operations for the Inquisitors and the Inquisition to ferret out and execute witches. Wicasta Lovelace (2003) quoted estimates that “the death toll during the Inquisition worldwide range from 600,000 to as high as 9,000,000 (over its 250 year long course).”

Saul’s having early Christians “committed” to prison should not be misunderstood as meaning that Christians would simply receive a jail sentence as a punishment for being a Christian. Prisons and jails were holding pens, so to speak, for people awaiting trial. At trial a prisoner could be (1) found innocent and released, or (2) found guilty of a capital offense and executed (Num 15:32–36; Lev 24:10–23), or (3) found guilty a lesser offense and sentenced to some form of corporeal punishment, like the forty stripes spelled out in Deut 25:1–3, or in later times having one’s head, hands and feet placed in the stocks. A *prison sentence*—defined as confinement in a prison/ penitentiary for a crime—is a relatively modern legal option invented in America by William Penn and the Quakers of Pennsylvania who opposed all bloodshed, including the execution of criminals. (Quakers assumed that prisoners who were held for an extended period of time in silent solitary confinement would become penitent, thus the name “penitentiary.”)

Where there was no Quaker influence the Decalogue, as the code of capital offenses, was not only idealized and perpetuated by religious communities in England and America but expanded to include a much wider range of capital offenses. In a recent study on the death penalty in America, Stuart Banner (2002: 6–8) noted that while the northern colonies were more lax with crimes against property, crimes against morality were more harsh in the north, with blasphemy, idolatry, sodomy, and bestiality having become capital offenses in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. By contrast, in Virginia capital crimes came to include the smuggling or embezzling of tobacco, and even the stealing of hogs. Banner noted that “As the New England colonies lost their original sense of a religious mission, they abandoned the death sentence for some of these moral

crimes.” For example, Massachusetts decapitalized blasphemy, adultery, and incest in the late seventeenth century, and New Hampshire decapitalized blasphemy in the early eighteenth century. But while the some colonies were decapitalizing some offenses, in England the “Ten Commandments” (i.e., a code of capital crimes) were expanded twenty-fold to about two hundred crimes which had become capital offenses.

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

“There shall not be to you other gods contrary to my will”
Exod 20: 3 and Deut 5:7

“Before me” or “Besides me” or “Against my will”

The exact meaning of the Hebrew *‘al pānāy*, generally translated as “before/besides me” or “in my face/presence,” has been difficult to determine. The suggestion here is to follow an insight by Mitchell Dahood (1966: 125) who translated Ps 19:15 as “May the words of my mouth be . . . according to your will, O Yahweh . . .” Dahood cited Albright, Johnson, and Speiser, all of whom translated *pānîm* in some texts not as “face/faces” but as a homograph meaning “favor, will, intention.” The latter word occurs in the opinion of these scholars in Phoenician and Ugaritic (which are related to Hebrew) and in the following biblical texts (with the corresponding word italicized)

1. Gen 10:9 “he was a mighty hunter by the *will* of Yahweh”
2. Gen 17:18 “Let but Ishmael thrive if you so *will* it”
3. Gen 27:7 “that I may eat it and bless you with Yahweh’s *approval* before I die”
4. Gen 43:33 “and as the men took their seats at his *direction*”
5. II Chron 32:2 “his *intention* was war.”

Several years later Gunther Plaut (1974: 159) concurred in his commentary on Genesis and translated

6. Gen 10:9 as “by the *grace* of the LORD”;
7. Gen 17:18 as “Oh that Ishmael might live *by Your favor*”
8. Gen 27:7 as “to eat that I may bless you, with the LORD’s *approval*, before I die”
9. Gen 43:33 as “they were seated by his *direction*.”

Similarly, the *‘al pānāy* “upon my face” in the Decalogue should be repointed and read as *‘al pānî* “against my will.”

The prohibition of Israel’s having any god other than the Creator addressed the issue of power. The root meaning of *’Ē* “God” is “power,” even when the noun is spelled as *’ēlôah* or as the honorific plural *’ēlôhîm*. The expression “God be with you” carried a meaning analogous to the science-fiction salutation “may the Force be with you”—with the difference being that in the former “God” is personal and masculine, whereas “the Force” is an impersonal neuter. The Islamic affirmation (which was added to the flag of Iraq in 1991), “Allahu Akbar,” meaning “God is Great,” has its parallel in Job 36:5, *’ēl kabbîr* “God is Great,” which was immediately modified by the phrase *kabbîr koah lēb* “Great, powerful of heart.” The modifiers “great” and “powerful” are actually definitions of the three Hebrew words (*’ēl*, *’ēlôah* and *’ēlôhîm*) translated as “God.”

The attraction of the forbidden fruit of Eden for Eve and Adam was that by eating the fruit they would “become like God,” which was to say that they would get *power*. The temptation was not about the acquisition of knowledge or holiness; it was about the acquisition of *power*. The building of the Tower of Babel was about *power*, the *power* to be used for self-defense. But God terminated the construction of the tower because “nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (Gen 11:6). Israel’s attraction to the fertility cults of Canaan was not about sex per se, it was about *power*—the *power* to perpetuate life and to produce food to sustain life. Israelites were as human as everyone else. They gravitated toward winners with *power*. Consequently, when the gods of Israel’s neighbors won wars for their peoples and provided lands that really flowed with milk and honey, many Israelites who thought Yahweh was powerless transferred their loyalty to where the *power* seemed to be—to a winners like Babylon’s Queen of Heaven (Jer 44:17–19).

The first commandment addressed the deceptive deification of power which would proved to be destructive and deadly. The Creator with cosmic power had initiated a covenant with a powerless people through whom all the families on earth would be blessed. As vassals of a benevolent liege Lord their absolute allegiance was required. There was no need for Israel, as the Creator’s royal priesthood and holy nation, to seek power from any force or source in

nature. Having a covenant relationship with the Creator of the sun, moon, and stars there was no need for Israelites to worship any of the the heavenly hosts. Even the death sentence imposed for violating this commandment was a declaration of the power of the Creator. An Israelite's death would not be determined by the deity of the underworld named *Mot* ("Death") whom the Canaanites worshiped. The Israelites would live and die according to the loving kindness and justice of the Creator. As noted above, "God is great" and "powerful of heart," and it was the divine will that Israel rely solely upon the Creator.

Monolatry or Monotheism

Cecil B. DeMille's statement (1955: 5–6) that the Ten Commandments were "the Divine Code of Guidance which was given to the world" echos a sentiment shared by a number of biblical commentators, as reflected in the title of Edwin Poteat's 1953 commentary on the Decalogue, *Mandate to Humanity*. However, for the Deuteronomist, if not for Moses, the Decalogue was Yahweh's unique gift to Israel, not a present to the nations nor a mandate for humanity. The Deuteronomist presented God and Moses as being very ethnocentric. According to Genesis 12, Yahweh made a covenant with Abraham promising that through him and his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. But from the perspective of the Deuteronomist, Abraham's descendants through Ishmael and Esau were excluded from the covenant. The "thou" of the Decalogue was the same as the "thou" of the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone, and thou [Israel] shalt love Yahweh *thy* God . . ." (Deut 6:5). The Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 included a stanza affirming emphatically, "When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of god; for Yahweh's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage" (32:8–9). (The RSV and NRS follow the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint which read here *'ēl* "God" instead of the *yisrā'ēl* "Israel" which appears in the rabbinic Hebrew texts and was followed by the KJV, NIV and NIB.)

The gods which Yahweh assigned for non-Israelites to worship were designated in Deut 4:19, "And when you [Israel] look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and

the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them which Yahweh your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven.” Thus, the Deuteronomist understood that Yahweh had ordained *monolatry* (defined as “the worship of one god only”) for Israel, not a *monotheism* for the whole world. Israel’s monolatry would require the worship of the *Creator* Yahweh only; but all other people would have to worship something from the *creation*—the sun or moon or an astral deity assign to each nation by Yahweh. Thus, while polytheism and henotheism were prohibited for Israel, they were viewed as legitimate religious options to be tolerated *outside* of Israel—even permitted and promoted among the heathen. In the words of Eph 2:11–12, “Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh . . . were at that time . . . separated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God (“atheist” = “God rejected”) in the world.”

Absent from Deuteronomy was any declaration of absolute monotheism such as that found in Isa 45:5–7, “I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides me there is no God . . . I am Yahweh and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make peace and I create evil—I Yahweh, do all these things.” The “greatest” commandment in Deut 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone. . . ” is not really an affirmation of monotheism but of monolatry. The phrase *Yahweh ʿehad* cannot mean “Yahweh One.” Proper names in Hebrew cannot be modified by numerals; therefore it must mean “Yahweh alone” or “Yahweh only.”

The final demise of polytheism, henotheism, and monolatry was envisioned by the psalmist who—with Deut 32:8 in mind—penned Psalm 82. In eight verses the psalmist presented the reader with a scene of heaven’s Supreme Court when God, as the Chief Justice, indicted the other gods for dereliction of duty in adjudicating justice for the poor in their respective jurisdictions. The gods were convicted and sentenced to death (“You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you, But you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes”). With the gods of the nations doomed to death, the psalm closed with a spectator in heaven’s courtroom pleading with the Chief Justice: “Arise, O God, judge the earth for to thee belong all the nations!” Here, in the last verse of Psalm 8 monotheism and universalism are proclaimed. But such

monotheism and universalism will not be found in Decalogue of Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5.

Penalty for Violating the First Commandment

- “Whoever sacrifices to any god, save to Yahweh only, shall be utterly destroyed”(Exod 22:20)
- “If a prophet arises among you . . . and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods . . . and let us worship them . . . that prophet . . . shall be put to death” (Deut 13:1–5)
- “If your brother . . . or your son, or your daughter, or your wife . . . or your friend who is as your own soul entices you secretly, saying, ‘let us go and worship other gods,’ . . . you shall kill him, you hand shall be the first against him to put him to death . . . you shall stone him to death with stones ” (Deut 13:6–10)
- “But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die” (Deut 18:20).

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image . . .”
Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8 (cf. Deut 27:15)

Cain and Graven Images

This prohibition against the crafting of graven images by Israelites may well be grounded in the story about Cain’s killing Abel. The name Cain means “smith,” with the Hebrew word *qāyin*) being the cognate of the Arabic *qain* “smith.” In Gen 4:2 Cain was identified as the “one working the land,” which, in light of his name, no doubt referred to mining for metals. By contrast, the name Abel means either (1) a “skilled shepherd,” being the cognate of the Arabic *ʿabil*, which Lane (1863: 8) defined as being “skilled in the good management of camels and of sheep or goats,” or (2) “farmer,” with the name *Hebel* being a by-form of *yēbūl* “produce of the soil.”

For Cain the “fruit of the land” mentioned in Gen 4:3 would have been *minerals or metals*, rather than grain or grapes. For Abel/Hebel the “fruit of the ground” would have

been either the *fruit of the field* or the *fruit of the flock*. Consequently, the present which Cain labored over for some time before offering it to Yahweh would have been something of metal from the “fruit of the soil,” i.e., some sort of image or engraving. Abel, on the other hand, offered to Yahweh “from the firstborn of his flock.” Unfortunately for Abel, Cain’s gift was rejected by Yahweh, while Abel’s lambs were accepted. Depressed, jealous, and angry over God’s rejection of his gift, Cain killed Abel. As a consequence, he was cursed by God and told that the land would no longer yield its *koah* “power” to him. Although most exegetes interpret this “power” to refer to “produce” (fruit and vegetables) it was more likely a reference to metals and minerals. The story about Cain and Abel reflects the tensions in antiquity between sedentary urban craftsmen on the one hand and rustic agrarians or pastoral Bedouins on the other hand. For the purpose of interpreting the second of the Ten Commandments, the Cain and Abel story makes it quite clear that Yahweh’s dislike of graven images went way back in legend and tradition—his disdain of images did not begin with golden calf at Sinai (Exodus 32).

The Image God Favors

Once the meaning of the name “Yahweh” comes into focus, the contempt of Yahweh for graven images becomes transparent. As discussed below, the verb “Yahweh” equals the English noun “Creator.” Nothing in creation—with one exception—can do justice to the Creator. The earth’s most pure gold and silver are but paltry products by which to represent the Creator of the cosmos (Exod 20:23; Lev 19:4; Deut 27:15). David Freedman (2000: 35–36), after quoting Isa 40:18–25 as a commentary on the Second Commandment, stated, “Nothing of human invention could ever be adequate to capture all that Yahweh is. . . . How could a mere creature ever hope to accurately represent the Creator?” Also, because no one had ever seen Yahweh, it was impossible for any image made by mortals to reflect the truth about the Eternal. It is true that Num 12:8 quoted Yahweh as saying with reference to Moses, “With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of Yahweh.” But a commentary on this verse in Exod 33:20–23, quoted Yahweh as having said, “You [Moses] cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live. . . . you will see my back; but my

face will not be seen.” Thus, Moses was granted the same courtesy which Yahweh had earlier extended to Hagar, after which she called Yahweh *ʿēl rōʿî*, “the seeing God,” and confessed, “Here have I seen the hinder parts of him that seeth me”(Douay Rheims, 1899, Gen 16:13). But neither Hagar nor Moses provided a description of the “back” of God which could have benefited artisans or artists. In the words of John 4:24, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

The one image in *creation* which can do justice to the *Creator* is the one image made by the *Creator*. As stated in Gen 1:27, “God said, ‘Let us make *ʿādām* “humans” in our image, after our likeness’” In the covenant with Noah the sacredness of human beings as those in God’s image was reiterated, “Whoever sheds the blood of *ʿādām*, by *ʿādām* his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God he made *ʿādām*.” As Freedman noted (2000: 36), “Any attempt to make another image of God, especially from an inanimate” object such as wood or metal, is to degrade both God and humankind.” Poteat (1953) astutely observed. “Because man is made in God’s image, he thinks man is as worthy of worship as God. This is image worship on its subtlest . . . and its most disappointing level.”

A Jealous God or a Creator God?

The first words of the prologue, “I am Yahweh your God,” are repeated in the second commandment in Exod 20:5 and Deut 5:9, where they are followed by the title *ʿl qnʿ*, which was read as *ʿēl qannāʿ* “a jealous God.” It is stated that Yahweh claimed this title because, even though he showed steadfast love to thousands of those who loved him (cf. Exod 34:7a; Neh 9:17, 31; Jon 4:2; and Ps 108:4), he visited the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hated him (cf. Exod 34:6-7b; Num 14:18; and Jer 32:18).

However, the title *ʿl qnʿ* could be read as *ʿēl qōnēʿ* “creator God,” with the participle *qōnēʿ* being a variant spelling of *qōnēh* “creator. The title *qnyt ʿilm* “creatress of the gods” was an epithet of the goddess Asherah and the verb *qānāh* “to create” is found in Prov 8:22, as translated in the Septuagint and in the RSV, NRS, NJB, NIV, NIB, and NLT. David Freedman proposed (1986: 515) that the phrase *yahweh qannāʿ šēmô* of Exod 34:14a means “he creates zeal

is his name” and the *yahweh qannā^o hū^o* of Exod 34:14b means “he is a zealous God.” But in Exod 34:10 the phrase *ma^osēh yēhowāh*, “the work of Yahweh,” and the verb *nibrē^oû*, “they had been created,” suggests that the repeated *qannā^o* in 34:14 could well have been the by-form of *qānāh* “to create,” permitting the translation “Yahweh Creator is his name” and “he is a creator God.” Precisely because Israelites have the *Creator* as their God they must not worship any *thing* which was created, be it astral or earthly.

Jeremiah appears to have had both definitions of *ʿl qn^o* in focus when he prayed (32:17–18), “Ah, my Lord Yahweh, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm” (which reflects the idea of *ʿēl qōnē^o* “creator God”), and then followed that affirmation with, “you requite the guilt of the fathers to their children after them” (which reflects the idea of *ʿēl qannā^o* “a jealous God”). But, surprisingly, Jeremiah continued, “O great and mighty God whose name is Yahweh Sabaoth, great in counsel and mighty in deed; whose eyes are open to all the ways of mortals, *rewarding all according to their ways and according to the fruit of their doings*” (italics added). These italicized words reinforce Jeremiah’s prediction found in 31:29, “In those days they shall no longer say: ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.”

Ezekiel was even more emphatic in challenging the statements in Exod 20:5b and Deut 5:9b that Yahweh “visited the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation” of them that hated him. However, he did not challenge Moses or the Decalogue directly. Rather, like Jeremiah, he challenged the veracity of the well known proverb that, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge” (Ezek 18:2). The justice of Yahweh, as expressed in Exod 20:5b and Deut 5:9b, led many Israelites to assert, “the way of the Lord is not just!” (Eze 18:24). As a result, thirty verses in Ezekiel 18—cited as a direct quotation of Yahweh—affirm emphatically, “the soul that sins shall die,” “the righteous shall surely live,” and “the son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son” (18:4, 9, 20).

It is most unlikely that Yahweh changed his mind and message sometime between the time of Moses and the time of

Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It is more likely that the ambiguous *ʾl qnʾ* in Exod 20:5 and Deut 5:9 originally meant “a creating God” but was mistakenly read as *ʾēl qannāʾ*, “a jealous God.” Once the misinterpretation of the *ʾl qnʾ* occurred, an explanatory gloss was added to explain why Yahweh became known as a “jealous God.” Subsequently, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel presented Yahweh as correcting the error in perfectly clear statements about the workings of Yahweh’s justice. Thus, in disagreement with Exod 20:5b and Deut 5:9b, Yahweh is quoted by Ezekiel as saying, “Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. So repent and live!” (Ezek 18:32). For Ezekiel this was the true “oracle of my Lord Yahweh,” not Exod 20:5b or Deut 5:9b.

Penalty for Violating the Second Commandment

- “If there is found among you . . . a man or woman who . . . has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden, . . . you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones . . . the hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death” (Deut 17:2).
- A death sentence for the idolater lies behind the statement, “I will destroy your high places, and cut down your sun-images, and cast your dead bodies upon the bodies of your idols” (Lev 26:30)
- A death sentence for the idolater lies behind the statement, “I will lay the corpses of the people of Israel in front of their idols; and I will scatter your bones around your altars . . . And you shall know that I am Yahweh when their slain lie among their idols around their altars” (Ezek 6:5 and 6:13).

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

“You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain”
Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11

Commands to Swear and Not to Swear

A second imperative must be read in conjunction with the Third Commandment, namely, Deu 6:13, “You shall fear Yahweh your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name.” Thus, swearing by Yahweh’s name is a mandate for Israelites; but there was to be no *false* swearing, as Lev 19:12

made perfectly clear, “And you shall not swear falsely (*laššāqer*) by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am Yahweh.” The name “Yahweh” occurs in Genesis over one hundred twenty-five times, from the time of Cain and Abel down to the death of Joseph. It is therefore surprising to read in Exod 6:2–3, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *ʿēl šadday* ‘God Almighty,’ but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.” It is all the more surprising because *El Shaddai* appears only six times in Genesis (compared to twenty-three times in Job and eleven times elsewhere). The disparity disappears once (1) the disjunctive “but” is read as the conjunctive “and,” and (2) the negative particle *loʿ* “not” is read as the emphatic affirmative *luʿ* “indeed.” Thus, by simply changing one vowel, Exod 6:3 can be read as “I appeared . . . as God Almighty *and* by my name Yahweh I did *indeed* make myself known.”

The noun *šāwēʿ* “vain, empty” used in this commandment was used in conjunction with the following words:

- *bērak* “to bless,” with the antithetical meaning “to curse” when used in proximity to the name or person of God, as in Job 1:5, 11; 2:5, 9; Ps 10:3, and 1 Kings 21:10, 13.
- *nāʿaš* “to blaspheme,” which appears in 2 Sam 12:14, “you [David] have really blasphemed Yahweh”; Isa 52:5, “their masters howl in triumph, declares Yahweh, and my name is blasphemed continually every day”; Ezek 35:12, “I, Yahweh, have heard all the blasphemies which you have uttered against the mountains of Israel”; Neh 9:18 “even when they made for themselves a molten calf . . . and committed great blasphemies”; Neh 9:26, “. . . they killed your prophets . . . and committed great blasphemies”; and Ps 74:10, “Will the enemy blaspheme Your name forever?”
- *qālal* “to curse,” which appears in Exod 22:28, “Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people” (NIB); Lev 24:15, “Those who blaspheme God will suffer the consequences of their guilt and be punished” (NLT); 1 Sam 3:13 “. . . because his [Eli’s] sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them” (RSV, NRS).

- *nāqab* “to blaspheme,” which occurs only in Lev 24:10–17, which tells of an Egypto-Israelite who blasphemed and cursed “the Name,” and as a result was stoned to death.

In Lev 24:10–17, the name “Yahweh” does not appear, only the noun with the definite article, *haššem* “the Name.” Either this substitute or *ʾādonai* is consistently used by Jews so as not to profane the ineffable name. The care taken to refrain from pronouncing the name resulted in the meaning and pronunciation of the name “Yahweh” being forgotten—with “Yahweh,” meaning “Creator” (as discussed above), being a scholarly reconstruction. Many pious Jews extend their reverence for the holy name to include the English noun “God” by spelling it as “G-d.”

Sura 2:224–225 in the *Quran* also provides a commentary on this commandment. It reads,

Use not Allah’s name for your vain oaths, making them an excuse for refraining from doing good and working righteous and promoting public welfare. . . . Allah will not call you to account for that which is unintentional in your oaths, but he will call you to account for the evil to which you have deliberately assented.

In the context of the current American religio-political debate much more is involved than just the prohibition against the profane use of divine names and nouns. Jane Eisner (2004: C5) called attention to the prevalent “ceremonial deism” by which some argue that the phrase “one nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance is “so conventional and uncontroversial as to be constitutional,” leading some Christian and Jewish clergy to file a legal brief “contending if *under God* isn’t to be taken seriously, ‘then every day, government asks millions of schoolchildren to take the name of the Lord in vain.’”

The Name “Yahweh” Means “Creator”

Edgar Park (1962: 980) stated in his exposition of Exod 20:2, “The LORD does not at the moment name himself as ‘Creator of the universe,’ ‘Lord of the whole world,’ but as the liberator of Israel from the foreign yoke.” However, the *creative* power of God is actually reflected in the name *Yahweh*. Before *Yahweh* became an ineffable name it was

pronounced and spelled in a number of different ways. The early church fathers pronounced it as *ʾIaô* or *ʾIao* or *Yahô*, all of which point to the holy trigrammaton *YHW* used in personal names like *Yehonatan* / *Yônatan* / Jonathan, meaning “Yahweh has given.” In Greek sources it was pronounced as *Iabe* or *Iae* or *Iaoue* or *Iaouai*, all of which reflect the tetragrammaton *YHWH* and point to its original pronunciation as the verb *yahweh* “he caused to be, he caused to exist.” This interpretation that *YHW* and *YHWH* is a causative form of the verb—with the meaning “cause to be” rather than the simple form meaning “to be”—has the support of David Freedman (1986: 500, 513) who, in agreement with his distinguished mentor, William Albright, stated “*yahweh* must be causative The name *yahweh* must therefore be a hiphil [causative]. Although the causative of *hwy* is otherwise unknown in Northwest Semitic . . . , it seems to be attested in the name of the God of Israel.”

Freedman also suggested (1986: 515–516) that the statement *ʾehyeh ʾăšer ʿehyeh*, “I am who I am,” in Exod 3:14 could be read as a causative meaning “I create whatever I create,” to be interpreted as “I am the creator par excellence.” (Shifting from “I am” to “I create” requires the verb *ʾhyh* to be read as *ʾahyeh* rather than *ʾehyeh*, with the an *a* vowel in the first syllable being needed to make it a causative form.) So as not to profane the holy name of God, the Jewish scribes *deliberately* mispronounced and misspelled the name of Yahweh by combining the consonants *YHWH* with either the vowels of the substitute title *ʾAdonai* “my Lords” (an honorific plural) or the vowels of *ʾelohîm* “God” (an honorific plural). Similarly, by vocalizing *ʾhyh ʾšr ʾhyh*, as *ʾehyeh ʾăšer ʾehyeh*, meaning “I am who I am,” rather than as *ʾahyeh ʾăšer ʾahyeh*, meaning “I create what I create,” the scribes out of piety also *deliberately* mispronounced the phrase and thereby obscured its true pronunciation and meaning.

The evidence in support of reading *YHWH* as “Creator” and *ʿHYH* as “I create” is quite compelling. Most of the 6,000 plus occurrences in the Bible of the verb-based name *Yahweh* could be paraphrased in English by using the noun *Creator*. Consequently, the prologue to the Decalogue should be read as “I, the Creator, am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Israel would be the holy people of the Creator alone—upon pain of death.

The Penalty for Violating the Third Commandment

“He who blasphemes the name of Yahweh shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the name, shall be put to death” (Lev 24:16).

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy . . .

[Yahweh] rested the seventh day,
therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath . . .”

Exod 20:8

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy . . .you shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt . . . and Yahweh your God brought you out from there . . .”

Deut 5:12

Two Reasons for Observing the Sabbath

According to Deut 5:15, Yahweh commanded the observance of the Sabbath because of the Exodus, saying in his pronouncement, “Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt, and that Yahweh your God brought you out of there with mighty hand and outstretched arm; this is why Yahweh your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” However, some of the Israelite tribes had never gone down to Egypt. (Gen 47:26–27, for example, states that only seventy of Jacob’s descendants went into Egypt; and the genealogies of I Chronicles 1–8 ignore the exodus and suggest the continuous presence of Hebrews in Palestine since their initial migration.) The tribes which became enslaved in Egypt included the Joseph tribes, the Levites, and perhaps Simeon. The other Leah tribes, with Judah being the strongest and largest, were located in the Negeb and the territory of the Kenites; and the concubine tribes (Dan and Naphtali, the sons of Bilhah, plus Gad, Asher, Issachar, and Zebulun, the sons of Zilpah) evidently remained in the highlands of the north and central hill-country. So with about half of the tribes having never been enslaved in Egypt, the reason for observing the Sabbath, as given in Deuteronomy, did not reflect the historical reality of those tribes. In the attempt to give a reason for the Sabbath observance that would embrace all tribal histories, the Exodus 20 Decalogue grounded the Sabbath commandment in the creation story.

Gen 2:2a can be translated as “And God was *fatigued* on the seventh day [from] his work which he had done.” This weariness of God is noted in Exod 31:17, which speaks of God’s taking a breather, “Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he stopped and refreshed himself.” The theme of fatigue among the gods is dominant in the *Atra-Ḥasīs* creation myth, which includes the following lines (I:1-4; III:162–163) as translated by Lambert and Millard (1969: 43, 49):

When the gods like men
Bore the work and suffered the toil—
The toil of the gods was great,
The work was heavy, the distress was much—
... they suffered the work day and night
... Excessive [toil] has killed us;
Our work [was heavy], the distress much.

The threat of a revolt by the work-wearied lesser gods against the high gods of leisure eventuated in the creation of the *lulu*, “human beings,” whose labor would permit all the gods to stop work and rest. The Genesis and Babylonian traditions were in agreement that the *work* of God/gods led to divine *fatigue*, followed by divine decision(s) to give *rest* to the weary. In the myth only the gods were granted rest. But in Exodus 20 not only had God rested, but those created in his image were gifted with a Sabbath rest, precluding the exploitation through endless labor of anyone in Israel.

A key phrase in the Exodus account is “Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy,” which led Weinfeld (1991:302–303) to point out that in Exodus 20 the Sabbath belongs to the divine sphere and not originally a social-humanistic institution, the way Isaiah 58 and Deut 5:15 presented it. Weinfeld further noted that the observance of the Sabbath involved “visiting holy places (Ezek 46:3; Isa 66:23), consulting the prophet (2 Kings 4:23), and performing special sacrificial and ceremonial rites (Lev 24:8–9; Num 28:9–10; 2 Kings 11:9).”

Jesus statement, “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27), suggests that Jesus followed the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue and the delineation of the Sabbath in Isaiah 58, giving priority to the social-humanistic institution of the Sabbath.

The Penalty for Violating the Fourth Commandment

- “You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you; every one who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. . . whosoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death” (Exod 31:14–16,)
- “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to Yahweh; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death” (Exod 35:2).
- “But if you do not listen to me, to keep the sabbath day holy . . . then I will kindle a fire in its gates and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched” (Jer 17:27).

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

“Honor your father and your mother”
Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16 (cf. Deut 27:16)

Honor or Hate

For many Christians the statement by Jesus (Mark 2:27) about the Sabbath has provided the key for the command’s proper interpretation. By contrast, one statement by Jesus about child-parent and family relationships appears to turn the Fifth Commandment upside down. According to Luke 14:26 Jesus said, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” According to Moses, God said “Honor!” but, according to Luke, Jesus said “Hate!” Many Christians simply ignore Luke 14:26, preferring to live by Matt 10:37, “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” But others, seeking to legitimate their hateful relationships as a requirement of biblical faith, ignore Moses and Matthew and live according to Luke.

The clarity of the Fifth Commandment, coupled with a biblical litany of love which is traceable *from* Lev 19:17 to “love your kinfolk”(and its quotations in Matt 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9; and James 2:8) *through* 1 Cor 13:13, “the greatest of these is love,” and *culminating* in 1 John 4:21, “this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also,” makes the

accuracy of Luke's quotation of Jesus questionable.

A misreading of just one consonant or vowel could have created this disparity about *honoring* or *hating* one's parents. Luke probably utilized Hebrew and Aramaic sources when writing his gospel (sources which would have had no vowel signs or vowel points). If so, the Hebrew word *l'* could have been read as either *lo'* "not" or as *lu'* "truly." Thus, the phrase in Hebrew or Aramaic could have meant "if you *truly* hate . . ." rather than "if you do *not* hate . . ." Moreover, Hebrew *spelling* in Jesus's day did not distinguish the *s* sound from the *sh* sound. A verb spelled *snh* or *sn'* could have been read either as *sanē'* "to hate" or as *shanâ* "to forsake" or *sana'* "to give one his rightful due." The question then becomes, did Luke's source mean (1) "if you do not forsake" or (2) "if you do not hate," or (3) "if you do not do right"? The disparity between the Decalogue's demand and Jesus' command can be explained by the ambiguities of Hebrew and Aramaic spelling. What was perfectly clear in speech became ambiguous when written. Translators of ambiguously written texts did make mistakes and some mistakes had serious consequences.

"Honor" the Honorable and "Take Seriously" the Dishonorable

In Hebrew the verb *kibbed* "to honor" comes from the stem meaning "to be heavy, weighty, serious." Its Arabic cognate includes the idea of "struggling, contending with difficulties or troubles." In a healthy, functional family filial piety would naturally be expressed by *kabôd* "respect and honor" being given by children to parents. But in dysfunctional families where child abuse is systemic—with the World Health Organization estimating that millions of children in the world today are abused—the *kabôd* "honor" must shift its meaning to "difficulty, distress, affliction, trouble," like its Arabic cognate *kabad* (Lane 1885: 2584). Dysfunctional, HIV-infected, and drug addicted parents *must be taken seriously*, if not honorably. In the words of Poteat (1953: 141), "One must take one's father and mother seriously even if they are altogether dishonorable. It is quite possible that the most valuable lessons for our mature guidance are to be found as much in the failures and vices of our parents as in their success and virtues."

In Eph 6:1–4, Paul recognized that the Fifth Commandment cuts both ways and added the admonition, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Wisdom literature provided good advice on how, in a healthy functional family, to honor one’s parents, including

- Prov 1:8 “Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.,,”
- Prov 19:26 “He who robs his father and drives out his mother is a son who brings shame and disgrace.”
- Prov 23:22 “Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.”

Sirach 3:1–16 is an extended commentary on Exod 20:12 and Deut 5:16, including the promise in 3:3 that “those who honor their father atone for sins” (which draws upon Pro 16:6, “through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for”). The admonition in Sir 3:12, “O son, help your father in his old age” is also found in the *Quran* (Sura 17:23–25):

The Lord has commanded that ye worship none but Him and has enjoined benevolence towards parents. Should either or both of them attain old age in thy lifetime, never say ‘Ugh’ to them or chide them, but always speak gently to them. Be humbly tender with them and pray: ‘Lord have mercy on them, even as they nurtured me when I was little’ Render to the kinsman his due and to the needy and the wayfarer.

The Penalty for Violating the Fifth Commandment

- “Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death (Exod 21:15).
- “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death (Exod 21:17).
- “All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them (Lev 20:9).
- “Cursed be anyone who dishonors father or mother.” All the people shall say, “Amen!”(Deut 27:16).

THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

“You shall not murder”

Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17 (cf. Deut 27:24–25)

Cain, the Nephalim, and the “Men of Violence”

In Genesis 4 reference was made to two killings: Cain killed Abel and five generations later his namesake, Tubal-Cain, killed an unidentified attacker for striking him. But such scattered violence accelerated when, according to Genesis 6, the extra-terrestrial “sons of God” impregnated the terrestrial “daughters of men,” resulting in the birth of the Nephalim, who became known in tradition as “the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown.” But in the rabbinic work *Genesis Rabbah* 26, a certain rabbi named Aha interpreted the *ʿanšē haššem* “men of the name” to mean “they laid desolate the world, were driven in desolation from the world, and caused the world to be made desolate.” He associated the word translated “renown” with the verb *šāmam* “to ravage, to terrify.” Rabbi Aha was correct in concluding that the *hšm* in Gen 6:4 did not mean either “the name” or “renown.” For Rabbi Aha they were infamous, not famous. (Rabbi Aha missed, though, the proper derivation the *hšm*, which is the cognate of Arabic *hašama* “to destroy, smash, shatter”). Thus, “the mighty men of yore” were actually *ʿanšē hāsām* “men of violence.” And, according to Gen 6:11–13, the violence of this mixed breed of warriors led to the flood, as Yahweh indicated, “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and the earth was filled with violence . . . I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence.” The rampant violence and killings cited in Genesis 6 are reflected in later interpretations in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, as in

- Enoch 9:10, “and the women have born *giants*, and the whole earth has thereby been filled with blood and unrighteousness.”
- Enoch 15:11, “And the spirits of the giants afflict, oppress, destroy, attack, do battle, and work destruction on the earth and cause trouble.”
- Jubilees 5:1–2, “the angels of God saw them [the daughters of men] . . . and they bare unto them sons and they were *giants*. . . and they began to devour each other.”

The Covenant with Noah

It was the pervasiveness of the killings in the pre-flood era that led Yahweh to stipulate after the flood in his covenant with Noah, “And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. . . . And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen 9:5–6). In this scheme of governance capital punishment was to be a deterrent against all killing. From Noah’s time until after Israel’s exodus from Egypt Yahweh never violated the covenant with Noah by requiring Hebrews or Israelites to kill anyone. Whenever killing was required Yahweh retained his prerogative to do it himself. At the first Passover, “at midnight Yahweh smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt” and at the Sea of Reeds “Yahweh routed the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.” Thus, the Israelite slaves walked away in freedom from Egypt without a single Israelite having killed a single Egyptian. The covenant with Noah was honored by both parties. Yahweh required no one to kill anyone, and not a single Israelite was put to death for violating the prohibition against shedding the blood of fellow humans who were in the image of God.

But in the wilderness of Sin the covenant with Noah was abrogated. When the Amalekites attacked the Israelites Moses authorized Joshua to marshal a militia and as a result “Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword” (Exod 17:13), apparently with Yahweh’s approval because the war was in self-defense. Shortly thereafter at the foot of Sinai obedient Levites killed three thousand of their own family members in a single day at the behest of Moses upon orders from Yahweh. These Levites were then rewarded with ordination into the priesthood (Exod 32:27–29). Whereas killing of another human had been an offense against God, at Sinai it had become a favor *for* God and was said to be favored *by* God. Warfare and ethnic cleansing became normative in Israel and the belief that God would drive out the Canaanites by hornets rather than by sword (Deut 7:20–23; Jos 24:12–13) faded away. Starting with Moses and Joshua, killing fellow humans for religious reasons was promoted, not prohibited..

Twelve words in Biblical Hebrew can be translated into English by the verb “to kill,” but only one of those twelve

words appears in the Decalogue, namely *rāṣah*. It was not a general term for killing but a technical word for “murder,” either *with premeditation* (as in Num 35:16–21, 30–31; Hos 4:2; and Jer 7:9) or *without intention* (as in Deut 4:42; 19:3–6; Num 35:6, 11, 12, 25–28; Jos 20:3–6 and 21:13, 21–26). Childs (1974: 420–421) summarized the scholarly debate about the meaning of *rāṣah*, including the opinions that it was used for (1) “illegal killing inimical to the community,” or (2) killing which was related to blood vengeance and the role of the avenger, or (3) killing out of personal malice, hatred, or deceit, which came to include murder and assassination. This verb did not deal with killing for religious reasons. Therefore, Moses was free to command the Levites to kill idolatrous Israelites, Joshua was free to kill pagan Canaanites indiscriminately, and King Pekah of Israel felt free to kill one hundred twenty thousand Jews in a single day (2 Chron 28:6). Holy war, crusades, and *jihad* were not prohibited by the Sixth Commandment as they had been in the covenant God made with Noah. Noah’s dove was devoured by the Hebrew hawks.

The Penalty for Violating the Sixth Commandment

- “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death (Exodus 21:12).
- “He who kills a man shall be put to death” (Lev 24:17 and 24:21).
- “But anyone who strikes another with an iron object, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. . . .”(Num 35:16, 17, 18, and 21).
- “Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. He must surely be put to death,” (Num 35:31).

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

“You shall not commit adultery”

Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18 (cf. Deut 27:20–23)

The Need to Know Who Was the Baby’s Father

According to Exod 22:16–17, the seduction of a virgin was not an act of adultery, nor was it a capital crime. The penalty for such a seduction was a marriage or a monetary settlement equivalent to the marriage present for a virgin.

Detailed lists of sexual sins which were viewed in Israel as capital crimes appear in Leviticus 18 and 20. The sin of adultery (i.e., sexual intercourse between a betrothed or married woman and any man who is not her betrothed or husband) heads the list in Lev 20:10–16. In comparing adultery with the other sins in the lists, Phillip (1970: 117) noted that the prohibition of adultery was “to protect the husband’s name by assuring him that his children would be his own . . . [which] explains why the law of adultery is restricted to sexual intercourse with a married woman, but does not seek to impose sexual fidelity on the husband.” In obvious agreement with Phillips, Freedman (2000: 126) added, “One reason for the emphasis placed on virgin brides, along with the harsh punishments toward unfaithful wives, is a grievous fear of mistaken paternity.”

Moreover, in early Israel there was no belief in a life after death in a heavenly kingdom. Sheol was the abode of the dead, the realm of the netherworld where the deceased slept with their fathers in eternal repose. A kind of personal salvation and eternal life was achieved through one’s progeny. All of one’s ancestors lived on in the memories of their offspring, generation after generation. Every birth perpetuated a particular line of ancestral memory. Without progeny there would be no memory; and without memory the last vestige of life would vanish into oblivion, taking with it the newly deceased and all those in the ancestral family. Thus, progeny provided a degree of life after death. Consequently, there was the social pressure to “be fruitful and multiply,” and there could be no uncertainty about who was the father of the child and whose ancestral family would be perpetuated through the memory of the newborn. Similarly, the levirate marriage (Gen 38:6–11 and Deut 25:5–10) was instituted to provide progeny for the man who died without a male heir so that the deceased and his ancestors might live on in family and tribal memory. It provided for a brother of a man who died without a son to impregnate the widow of the deceased and “the first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel” (25:6).

Adultery and Idolatry

In Jer 3:8 Yahweh is quoted by Jeremiah as saying “She [Judah] saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her

false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the harlot.” Reference here to a divorce being Yahweh’s punishment for Israel’s adultery may indicate that adultery was not always a capital crime. But even in Hos 2:3 there is a death threat from Hosea to Gomer when he states, “Plead with your mother . . . that she put away . . . her adultery from her breasts lest I strip her naked . . . and slay her with thirst.”

The fact that neither David nor Bathsheba were stoned to death for their adultery (nor David for his murder of Uriah) indicates that the crime of adultery had not yet been codified or that the law was applied selectively. Childs’ statement (1974: 422) , “Even the king, David, falls under the death sentence for his adultery with Bathsheba,” is a really a misstatement. So also is Freedman’s statement (2000:134), “And so David is punished tenfold for his action.” Despite the stipulation in Num 35:31, “Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. He must surely be put to death,” Nathan immediately assured David, “you shall not die.” Instead of being stoned a substitutionary atonement was provided for David through the death of the infant conceived in adultery, and the announcement that unnamed members of his family would be slain by the sword (2 Sam 12:13–23). But the sword never touched David, who, according to 1 Kings 2:10, died of old age. When Nathan told David of Yahweh’s decree, “I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight,” ten innocent women were punished, but not David. When Absalom forced David’s ten women into adultery, Absalom paid for that adultery with his life—but by hanging rather than by stoning (2 Sam 12:11–12; 18:10).

In the NIB “adultery” appears twenty-two times in each Testament. In the Old it translates not only the technical term *nāʾap* but also (1) *bāʾ ʾel* “he went into [Bathsheba]” in the superscription of Psalm 51, (2) *zārâ* “strange” in Pro 22:14, and (3) *zānâ* “to be a harlot” in Jer 3:6–9 and Hos 1:2, 2:4, 4:15. The NRS and others use “adultery” to translate the *nakri* “stranger” in Pro 2:16 and 7:5. The expression in Isa 57:3, “you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute,” clearly equated the “adulteress” with the “prostitute.”

In addition to *nāʾap* being the technical term for “adultery” it was used as a metaphor for idolatry, as in Ezek 23:37, “for they have committed *adultery* and blood is on

their hands; they committed *adultery* with their idols.” It was used along with *zānā* for idolatrous worship in

- Jer 3:8–9, “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce . . . because of all her adulteries. . . . she also went out and played the harlot.”
- Jer 5:7, “Your children have forsaken me and sworn by gods that are not gods. . . . they committed adultery and thronged to the houses of prostitutes.”
- Jer 13:27, “. . . . your adulteries and lustful neighings, your shameless prostitution.”
- Hos 2:4, “Let her remove her whorings (*zēnûnîm*) from her face and her adulteries (*ma³ăpûp*) from between her breasts.”

The reason “prostitution” was used as a metaphor for idolatry could have been that Canaanite fertility cults made use of cultic prostitutes and the gods and goddesses of the cult were represented by idols. On the other hand, the association could come from the coincidence that one of the Semitic words for “idols” was *zun*, which survived in Arabic where the masculine *zûn* and the feminine *zûnat* meant “an ornament or an idol and anything taken as a deity and worshiped beside God . . . a place in which idols are collected and set up” (Lane, 1867: 1273). This *zûnat* would have been spelled in Hebrew as *zônah*, which was by coincidence the same spelling as the Hebrew word for “prostitute.” The coincidence in speech and spelling made for a powerful *double entendre*.

The Penalty for Violating the Seventh Commandment

- “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death” (Lev 20:10).
- “If a man lies with his father’s wife daughter-in-law with a male both shall be put to death (Lev 20:11–16).

The prohibition of illicit sex in the Decalogue finds parallels in Egyptian literature in the *Instruction of Ani*, as translated by John Wilson (1955: 420),

. . . Be on guard against a woman from abroad, who is not known in her (own) town. Do not *stare at* her when she passes by. Do not know her carnally: a deep

water, whose windings one knows not, a woman who is far away from her husband. “I am sleek,” she says to thee every day. She has no witnesses when she waits to ensnare thee. It is a great crime (worthy) of death, when one hears of it . . . (iii: 13).

Similar advice appears in *The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-Hotep*, dating from about 2450 B.C., which Wilson (1955: 413) translated as

IF THOU DESIREST to make friendship last in a home to which thou hast access as master, as a brother, or as a friend, into any place where thou mightest enter, beware of approaching the women. It does not go well with the place where that is done. . . . One is made a fool by limbs of fayence, as she stands (there), . . . A mere trifle, the likeness of a dream—and one attains death through knowing her. . . . Do not do it—it is really an abomination—and thou shall be free from sickness of heart every day (276–295).

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

“You shall not steal”

Exod 20:15; Deut 5:19 (cf. Deut 27:17)

Stealing Property and Stealing a Person

Martin Luther, in his *Large Catechism* (Lenker 1935: 88–91) stated in reference to this Eighth (Luther’s Seventh) Commandment,

. . . “To steal” signifies nothing else than to obtain another’s property by unjust means. It briefly embraces every method in all lines of business, by which advantage is taken of a neighbor’s disadvantage. Stealing is a wide-spread, universal vice. . . . we must regard as stealing not only picking pockets and breaking into safes; stealing is taking advantage at market, in the stores, in groceries, hotels and restaurants, in factories, in short, wherever business is transacted and money is exchange for goods and labor In barter, the one deceives the other with inferior goods, false measures, unjust weights, counterfeit money, dextrous tricks, clever financiering and plausible tales there are also men whom you may call gentlemen-robbers, land-grabbers and road agents

. . . honorable, pious citizens, and, under the cloak of honesty, they rob and steal . . . (§89–91).

Luther's recognition that defrauding the poor is one form of robbery echoes Ezek 22:29, "The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and illtreat the alien, denying them justice," and Isa 1:23, "Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them."

Two verses from the Torah which are crucial for the interpretation of the Eighth Commandment are Exod 21:16, "Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death," and Deut 25:7, "If a man is caught kidnapping one of his brother Israelites and treats him as a slave or sells him, the kidnapper must die. You must purge the evil from among you."

According to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 86a) the rabbis debated the meaning of the Eighth Commandment, which included the question, "Where to we find the law against kidnapping?" Rabbi Josiah, repeating what he had been taught, said it was spelled out in the Eighth Commandment; but he was challenged by another rabbi who argued that the Eighth Commandment dealt with the theft of money. Arguing back, Rabbi Josiah commanded: "Go forth and learn from the thirteen principles whereby the Torah is interpreted"—knowing that one of the thirteen principles was that a law is to be interpreted by its general context. Rabbi Josiah then pointed out that the context of the Decalogue was a code of capital crimes, concluding, "Hence this too refers [to a crime involving] capital punishment."

Albrecht Alt (1953: 333–340), independent of rabbinic tradition, came to the same conclusion, arguing that the three short commandments (Exod 20:13–15; Deut 5:17–19) originally must have had an object following the verb just like the other commandments. Therefore, the Eighth Commandment should be reconstructed to read, "You shall not steal a person." Childs (1974: 424) was not fully convinced by Rabbi Josiah nor by Alt's arguments, stating, "The sharp distinction suggested by Alt between stealing a man and stealing his property cannot be easily sustained." But he concurred in part by concluding, "It does seem clear that the shortened form of the eighth commandment without an explicit object had the

effect of expanding the scope of the prohibition beyond its initial object.” On the other hand, Weinfeld (1991: 314) disagreed emphatically with Rabbi Josiah and Alt, stating, “The absolute categorical nature of the commandments of the Decalogue should, therefore, be applied to this commandment too: ‘You shall not steal’ includes all possible objects, people as well as goods.”

However, Phillips (1970: 130–131) offered the most helpful insight about Israel’s prohibition of theft when he noted that “theft of property in Israel was not a crime, but a tort [a civil offence] resulting in an action for damages by the injured party. . . . the injured party being restored as far as possible to the position he was in before the damage of which he claims occurred.” The civil offense of theft called only for a compensatory penalty rather than punishment. Restitution and deterrence were the key issues, with enslavement only for those who did not make restitution, as spelled out in Exod 22:1–3,

If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. If the stolen animal is found alive in his possession—whether ox or donkey or sheep—he must pay back double. A thief must certainly make restitution, but if he has nothing, he must be sold to pay for his theft.

The punitive damages requiring double restitution were widely extended beyond just livestock, so that,

If a man gives his neighbor silver or goods for safekeeping and they are stolen from the neighbor’s house, the thief, if he is caught, must pay back double. . . . In all cases of illegal possession of an ox, a donkey, a sheep, a garment, or any other lost property about which somebody says, “This is mine,” both parties are to bring their cases before the judges (*hā’ēlohîm* “the God”). The one whom the judges (*’ēlohîm* “God”) declare guilty must pay back double to his neighbor (Exod 22:7–9).

Prov 6:30–31 called for a seven-fold payback, and Num 5:7 required full restitution plus a twenty percent penalty.

However, there is a hint of a death penalty for stealing property in Ezek 33:15, “if the wicked gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live;

he will not die.” An even stronger reference to a death sentence for a common thief appears in the Septuagint text of Zec 5:3–4. The NIB translates the Hebrew text as,

This is the curse that is going out over the whole land; for according to what it says on one side, every thief will be banished, and according to what it says on the other, everyone who swears falsely will be banished. . . . I will send it out, and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of him who swears falsely by my name. It will remain in his house and destroy it, both its timbers and its stones.

But the repeated verb “will be banished” was rendered into Greek meaning “will be punished with death.”

Mass Murder, Kidnapping, and Theft Allegedly for God

The greatest case of murder, theft, and kidnapping in Israelite tradition is recorded in 2 Chron 28:5–8, and alluded to in 2 Kings 16:1 and Isa 7:1. For the Chronicler, because of the gross idolatry of and child sacrifices by King Ahaz of Judah, Yahweh gave him into the hands of King Rezin of Damascus (Syria) and King Pekah of Samaria (Israel), in what became known as the Syro-Ephraimite War (734–733 B.C.). Though unable to defeat Ahaz, King Rezin “took captive” (i.e., he kidnapped, with the intent to enslave) a large but unspecified number of Jews and took them to Damascus. Then King Pekah, upon learning of King Rezin’s booty taken from Judah, proceeded to attack Jerusalem also. In Isaiah’s words, “but they could not overpower her,” nevertheless, King Pekah decimated Jerusalem even though he did not capture and occupy the city. The Chronicler reported (2 Chron 28:6–8),

In one day Pekah . . . killed a hundred and twenty thousand soldiers in Judah—because Judah had forsaken the LORD, the God of their fathers. Zicri, an Ephraimite warrior, killed Maaseiah the king’s son, Azrikam the officer in charge of the palace, and Elkanah, second to the king. The Israelites took captive from their kinsmen two hundred thousand wives, sons and daughters. They also took a great deal of plunder, which they carried back to Samaria.

Though King Ahaz violated all five of the commandments on Tablet One of the Decalogue, he survived and died a

natural death, at age 36, and was buried in Jerusalem. But one-hundred twenty thousand allegedly idolatrous Jewish soldiers loyal to Ahaz were killed by the sword and the killings were done by fellow Israelites—reminiscent of the Levites’ slaughtering their sons and brothers at Sinai (Exod 32:27–29) at Moses’ behest for their dancing before the golden calf. Moreover, two hundred thousand Jews were kidnaped and destined for slavery in Samaria and Northern Israel.

Had it not been for the Samaritan prophet Oded who protested the slaughter of Jerusalem’s soldiers (“you have slain them in a rage which has reached up to heaven”) and a “peace party” of fellow Samaritans who protested the kidnappings and the intended enslavement of their fellow Israelites from Judah (2 Chron 28:9–15), all of Samaria would have consummated their violation of the Tenth Commandment, “You shall not covet,” as well as the Eighth commandment, “You shall not steal.” Though disguised as doing God’s will, Pekah and his people coveted what Ahaz had and whatever wealth there was in Jerusalem. Thus, they used a religious alibi to legitimate their slaughter and pillage in order to seize what they coveted. Thankfully for the kidnaped Jews, Oded and his Samaritan colleagues secured their freedom and escorted them safely home as far as Jericho. Oded obviously understood the entire Decalogue and recognized that Pekah’s coveting had cause countless deaths of the innocent. Indeed, coveting caused Pekah’s own death, for he was slain by a rival who coveted his throne—and as Pekah sowed, Pekah reaped.

The kidnapping of two-hundred thousand women and children by Pekah’s troops finds many parallels throughout the histories of warfare and of slavery. To this day the kidnappings continue, though not for any religious reason or alibi. A 2001 report by Protection Project, based at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington D. C., has documented the rising trends in the sex slave trade and has provided the following estimates

- 10,000 women from the former Soviet Union have been forced into prostitution in Israel.
- 10,000 children aged between six and fourteen are virtually enslaved in brothels in Sri Lanka.

- 15,000 women are trafficked into the United States every year, many from Mexico.
- 20,000 women and children from Burma have been forced into prostitution in Thailand.
- 60,000 Thai children have been sold into prostitution.
- 120,000 women are smuggled yearly into Western Europe, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, and forced into prostitution.
- 200,000 young girls from Nepal are working as sex slaves in India.

This white slavery mocks all five commandments on the second tablet of the Decalogue.

The Penalty for Violating the Eighth Commandment

- “Whoever steals a man, whether he sells him or is found in possession of him, shall be put to death” (Exod 21:16)
- “If a man is found stealing one of his brethren, the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die” (Deut 24:7).

THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

“You shall not bear false witness”

Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20 (cf. Deut 27:18–19, 25)

Judicial Safeguard for Justice

This prohibition deals with a key element in the judicial process as spelled out in the Book of the Covenant in Exod 23:1–3, “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.” A second text providing the judicial context of the Ninth Commandment is Deut 19:15–21,

One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offence he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD

before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Thus, according to the closing sentence of Deut 19:21, the sentence for false testimony could even be death. The requirement for two or more witnesses in cases of a capital offense also appears in Deut 17:6, “On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness,” and in Num 35:30, “Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.”

The Lies of Ahab, Jezebel, and Jehu

The well-known story of King Ahab’s acquisition of the Naboth’s vineyard in Jezreel (1 Kings 21) provides a commentary on the deadly consequences which false witnesses cause. When Naboth politely declined to exchange or sell his ancestral property to King Ahab, Queen Jezebel facilitated the transfer of property from Naboth to the king by having Naboth convicted on a trumped-up charge of blasphemy against God and king—for which he would be executed as the law required. To implement this scheme, she sent a letter, under the king’s name and seal, to the elders and nobles of Jezreel, instructing them to “proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.” The queen’s commands were read as the king’s commands and were fully obeyed by the officials of Jezreel. Thus, based upon the false testimony of two scoundrels, Naboth was convicted and stoned to death.

Although Ahab had nothing to do with the plot against Naboth, aside from his coveting Naboth’s vineyard, when Elijah met the king in Jezreel he was to charge Ahab with a

capital offense, saying, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?’ Then say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!’” The two scoundrels who provided the false testimony were never identified or held accountable, nor were the corrupt elders and nobles of Jezreel—they were all “just following orders.” Even Ahab’s sentence was commuted when Yahweh said to Elijah, “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son” (1 Kings 21:29). On the other hand, all participants in Naboth’s mock trial and his murder may have been included in the curse of 1 Kings 21:21 and 2 Kings 9:8, “I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free.”

Ahab actually died on a battlefield when struck by a random arrow (1 Kings 22:34–38), and the prediction in 1 Kings 21:19 that dogs would lick up Ahab’s blood was reported in 1 Kings 22:38 as having been fulfilled. King Jehu then ascended the throne of Israel and, thanks to a royal commission by an unnamed prophet, he assumed the role of God’s chief executioner in the extermination of the house of Ahab (2 Kings 9:7–10). Jehu first killed Joram, the son of Ahab and Jezebel, leaving his body unburied in Naboth’s vineyard (2 Kings 9:25–27). Jezebel then paid for her capital crimes when, on Jehu’s command, she was tossed out of a window and, as predicted, was devoured by dogs (2 Kings 9:30–37).

But the story about Naboth’s mock trial and the scoundrels who—contra the Ninth Commandment—falsely testified against Naboth does not end with Jezebel’s death. It ends only with the death of the house of Jehu and the fall of the ten tribe kingdom of Northern Israel. Although 2 Kings 10:30 quoted Yahweh as telling Jehu, “Because you have done well in accomplishing what is right in my eyes and have done to the house of Ahab all I had in mind to do, your descendants will sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation,” the prophet Hosea proclaimed a death sentence upon Jehu and his dynasty for all of his violations of the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not kill.”

When Hosea’s first son was born God commanded, “Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for

the massacre [literally, “the bloods”] at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel” (Hos 1:4). The plural “bloods” is significant for Jehu’s bloodbaths, according to 2 Kings 10, included

- the beheading of Ahab’s seventy sons and a presentation of their heads to him in Jezreel;
- after receiving the heads, “Jehu killed everyone in Jezreel who remained of the house of Ahab, as well as all his chief men, his close friends and his priests, leaving him no survivor”;
- on his way back to Samaria, via Beth Eked, Jehu killed forty-two Jews who had been visiting Ahab’s sons;
- “when Jehu came to Samaria, he killed all who were left there of Ahab’s family;
- then under false pretenses Jehu orchestrated a mandatory worship service for all Baal worshipers in which he himself offered a sacrifice to Baal—only to follow it with an order to kill all the worshipers once he made his exit at the end of the service.

Jehu’s killing spree was inspired by Elijah, and both men obviously thought the Decalogue (or its prototype) permitted religio-political killings. Hosea, in clear disagreement, reported Yahweh’s condemnation, “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.” (Hos 4:1–2). Similar words appear in Hos 10:7 and 10:13–15,

Samaria’s king shall perish, like a chip on the face of the waters. . . But you have planted wickedness, you have reaped evil, you have eaten the fruit of deception. Because you have depended on your own strength and on your many warriors, the roar of battle will rise against your people, so that all your fortresses will be devastated. . . . When that day dawns, the king of Israel will be completely destroyed.

What began simply as Ahab’s coveting Naboth’s vineyard, eventuated into the death of Ahab, all of his family, friends, and royal associates, as well as the end of Jehu’s dynasty and the demise of Northern Israel as an independent

kingdom a century later (722 B.C). A major catalyst in the downward spiral was the false testimony of two measly witnesses in a minor trial in Jezreel convened by corrupt judges. Who would have believed that just a little false testimony about old man Naboth would become so deadly and destructive and have such a long term affect? A false witness can bring death to many and in the end can become self-destructive. What a contrast to Jesus's statement, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).

The Penalty for Violating the Ninth Commandment

- "If the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother . . . Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot (Deut 19:21).

THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
You shall not covet your neighbor's wife . . .
Exod 20:17

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house . . .
Deut 5:21 (cf. Deut 27:17)

The Invisible Line between Bridled Desire and Unbridled Lust

The last commandment in the Decalogue differs slightly in Exod 20:17 from the one in Deut 5:21. The word order varies and the former repeats the verb *ḥāmad* "to covet," but the latter shifted the second verb to *hit'awweh* "to desire, to crave." The prohibition *'al taḥmod* in Prov 6:25 means "do not lust" and differs from the Tenth Commandment, *lo' taḥmod*, "do not covet" only in the use of a different negative particle. The difference between the "covet/lust" of Exod 20:17 and the "desire/crave" of Deut 5:21b led Childs (1974: 426) to conclude that "the stress on the emotion of the soul is certainly peculiar to *hit'awweh* in distinction to *ḥāmad*. . . . [But] in closely paralleled passages, *hit'awweh* and *ḥāmad* are used interchangeably without any significant difference in meaning." Weinfeld (1991: 316) concurred but added, ". . .

therefore *hmd* might sometimes connote more than just intention.” He paraphrased the prohibition as, “You shall not plan to appropriate the other’s wife and the other’s property.” But the “appropriation” of a neighbor’s wife puts the sole focus on the wife as a piece of property. The focus was also on the neighbor’s wife as a sexual person, so a better paraphrase might be, “Do not bring to fruition fantasies of fornication with your neighbor’s wife,” comparable to Prov 6:25, “Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes.”

Susanna and the Two Lying, Lecherous Judges

As noted above, King Pekah and his personnel coveted the people and portable possessions of the Jews in Judah; and the story in 2 Chronicles 28 provides a commentary on the tragic consequences when kinsmen covet their neighbor’s house, wife, servants, animals, or anything that belongs to their neighbor. Ahab’s coveting of Naboth’s vineyard, also noted above, is a case study of the dynamics and deadly results of simply coveting another’s property, with no hint of sexual lust.

The story which best illustrates the fatal consequences of coveting a neighbor’s wife is the Book of Susanna in the Apocrypha. According to this short story a wealthy and revered gentleman in Babylon, with a beautiful and pious wife named Susanna, frequently invited fellow Jews to his garden home and often hosted two elderly Canaanite judges who would hold court at the rich man’s residence. The two judges would linger after their court sessions to watch beautiful Susanna as she strolled in her husband’s garden. Coveting their rich neighbor’s wife

they perverted their minds and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering righteous judgments. Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to possess her. And they watched eagerly, day after day, to see her (9–12).

Once the judges became aware of each other’s lust they conspired to seduce Susanna. If she rejected their invitation for sexual intimacy, the two judges—with all of the authority of their office—would prosecute her on a trumped-up charge

of adultery and have her stoned to death. When Susanna rejected their advances, preferring death “rather than to sin in the sight of the Lord,” the judges proceeded with their threat and publicly announced that they had caught Susanna being intimate with a man who had been hiding in the garden. “The assembly believed them, because they were elders of the people and judges; and they condemned her to death” (41).

But before a stone was thrown a young man named Daniel shouted out, accusing the judges of bearing false witness against Susanna. Daniel called for a re-trial in which the judges would be questioned separately. Contradictory testimony by the judges when questioned exposed their treacherous lies and Daniel’s verdict was, “You also have lied against your own head, for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to saw you in two, that he may destroy you both.” Thus, Susanna was saved and the crowd “rose against the two elders, for out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; and they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbor; acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death” (59–62).

The two old men had crossed the invisible line between bridled desire and unbridled lust. Truth set Susanna free and, in truth, coveting can be deadly for the coveter. Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C– 50 A.D) rightly assessed the purpose of the closing prohibitions of the Decalogue, stating,

The fifth [commandment of the second tablet] blocks that fount of injustice, desire, from which flow the most iniquitous actions, public and private, small and great, dealing with things sacred or things profane, affecting bodies and souls and what are called external things. For nothing escapes desire, and as I have said before, like a flame in the forest, it spreads abroad and consumes and destroys everything. (*On the Decalogue* 32: 173; Colson 1998: 91–93).

The Penalty for Violating the Tenth Commandment

- “Do not look intently at a virgin, . . . Turn away your eyes from a shapely woman, . . . do not look intently at beauty belonging to another . . . by it passion is kindled like a fire. Never dine with another man’s wife, nor revel with her at wine; lest your heart turn aside to her, and in blood

you be plunged into destruction (Sirach 9:5–9).

- The “Hymn to the Sun-god” from the library of Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.) provides an extra-biblical reference to the fate of the one who covets, stating, “a man who covets his neighbor’s wife will die before his appointed day. Your weapon will strike him and there will be none to save” (Lambert 1960: 130).

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to establish with certainty that the Decalogue, or its archetype, was widely recognized as the quintessential criminal code in Israel and enforced consistently. The Decalogue may well have shared the fate of the Passover which, according to 2 Kings 23:21–22, had not been heard of nor observed for more than four hundred years. When and where the Decalogue was recognized in Israel and Judah its goal was to keep people alive on earth (“that your days may be prolonged”). But when the Decalogue came into focus in the New Testament the goal had shifted to the quest for eternal life (Matt 19:16–22; Luke 10:25–28). The Decalogue took third place after the *Shema* of Deut 6:4–5, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” and its runner-up in Lev 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Rom 8:10–13). According to John 13:34–35, Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (which is reiterated in John 15:12–13, 17 and I John 3:11–4:21). The motivation for obeying the Decalogue had been survival— so that one’s life would not be taken away. With Jesus’ new commandment, love was in control and life was to be given away, for “Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

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NOTES

1. The quotation with accompanying photographs was reprinted in *The Eagle Magazine*, 2001: 5–6.
2. Dr. Ralph Marcus of the Institute for Oriental Studies at the University of Chicago crafted two paleo-Hebrew/Phoenician style symbols for the top of the two red granite tablets used in DeMille’s *Ten Commandments* to give them a touch of authenticity.
3. The mesa is on private property requiring permission to visit the site.
4. See Barry Fell, *America B. C.*; Donald Cline, “The Los Lunas Stone,” *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications* 10 (1982); L. Lyle Underwood, “The Los Lunas Inscription,” *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications* 10 (1982); Jay Stonebreaker, “A Decipherment of the Los Lunas Decalogue Inscription,” *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications* 18 (1989).
5. A search for the “Los Lunas Ten Commandments” on the internet will provide a number of sources including <http://economics.sbs.ohio-state.edu/jhm/arch/loslunas.html> and this

author's study at <http://www.ebts.edu/tmcdaniel/LosLunas.html>.

“REFLECTION” BOX SUGGESTION

Walter Harrelson, on page 192 of *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Overtures in Biblical Theology. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), updated the biblical Decalogue with the following contemporary moral code:

1. Do not have more than a single ultimate allegiance.
2. Do not give ultimate loyalty to any earthly reality.
3. Do not use the power of religion to harm others.
4. Do not treat with contempt the times set aside for rest.
5. Do not treat with contempt members of the family.
6. Do not do violence against fellow human beings.
7. Do not violate the commitment of sexual love.
8. Do not claim the life or goods of others.
9. Do not damage others through misuse of human speech.
10. Do not lust after the life or goods of others.

For each of the ten commandments in Sessions 2–11, a “Reflection” box should be given suggesting that the reader compare Harrelson’s paraphrase (1980: 192) of that particular commandment and invite the reader to offer an alternative paraphrase for our time.

“Study Bible” Box (Introduction page 1, with the first mention of “Decalogue”) Special Note in *NISB*: “In Hebrew, Exod 34:28 and Deut 4:13 describe this legislation as ‘ten words.’ The Greek translation of the Hebrew *deka logoi* has given rise to the English title “Decalogue.”

“Study Bible” Box (A Jealous God or a Creator God) Excursus: The Character of Israel’s God,” *NISB* 134-135, calls attention to Num 14:18, Neh 9:17, 31; Ps 103:8; Jonah 4:2–3; Nah 1:2–3; 2 Esdr 7:132–140; 8:19–36.

“Reflection Question” (Monoltry or Monotheism)

Ronald E. Clements (*NISB*, 252) stated that “The first commandment identified God as Israel’s deliverer and reveals the basis of the special relationship that made this nation the means of a revelation given for all humankind. The commandments are thereby shown as universally relevant.”

Discuss when and how the Decalogue became universal. Since Israelites did not evangelize, how could the first commandment have been made universal?

INTERNET LINKS

The world's oldest inscription of the Ten Commandments is in New Mexico:

<http://www.ebts.edu/tmcdaniel/LosLunas.html>

Malleus Maleficarum or the "The Witches' Hammer"

<http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/>

The Quakers' invention of the penitentiary

<http://www.missioncreep.com/mw/estate.html>

<http://www.worldandi.com/newhome/public/2003/august/clpub3.asp>

<http://www.earthfolk.net/zip/pen.zip>

The Death Penalty in America

www.hup.harvard.edu/pdf/BANDEA.pdf

<http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/death/history.html#unitedstates>

The *Atra-Hasīs* creation myth

<http://home.apu.edu/~geraldwilson/atrachasis.html>

<http://www.nb.no/baser/schoyen/4/4.3/432.html>

The Book of Enoch

<http://www.nazarene.net/enoch/1enoch01-60.htm>

The Book of Jubilees

<http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/jubilee/index.htm>

The Instructions of Ptah Hotep

http://nefertiti.iwebland.com/texts/precepts_of_ptah_hotep.htm

Talmud: Sanhedrin 86a

<http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/>

<http://www.come-and-hear.com/talmud/>

<http://www.come-and-hear.com/copyright.html>