



Rembrandt van Rijn, Moses with the Tablets of the Ten Commandments, 1659.

The Ten Words/Commandments: Jewish and Christian Understandings



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Part 1: January 17-February 7

Session 1: The Decalogue: What are the Ten Commandments; What is the first Commandment?

Session 2: "You Shall Have No Other Gods"

Session 3: "You Shall Not Make a Graven Image;" "You Shall not Bow Down to Them"

Session 4: "You Shall Not Swear Falsely By God's Name"

Part 2 (After Easter, dates TBA)

Session 5: "You Shall Keep The Sabbath"

Session 6: "Honor Your Father and Your Mother"

Session: 7: "You Shall Not Commit Murder;" "You Shall Not Commit Adultery;; "You Shall Not Steal"

Session 8: "You Shall Not Bear False Witness"

Session 9: "You Shall Not Covet"

Session 10: Review and Wrap-Up

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Part 1: The Decalog: What are the “Ten Commandments” and which is the first?

Why the question? And why the scare quotes?

Exodus 20:1 does not refer to what follows as “commandments,” but rather as “words” (devarim, Hebrew-- words). And Exodus 20 does not give a number. It just says, “Then God spoke all these words.”

So to call these commandments, much less 10 commandments with specific numbers attached—that will come much later as later communities within both Judaism and Christianity make varying use of Exodus 20 over time.

The Text: Hebrew, with Jewish Publication Society Translation (2006, used by permission)

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וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר: {ס}

God spoke all these words, saying:

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדָי:

I am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:

לֹא־יְהִי־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עִלַּי־נָּ:

You shall have no other gods besides Me.

לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּמַמְעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ

מִתְּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם וּמִתְּחַת לָאָרֶץ:

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.

לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קָנָא פֹקֵד עֹון
אָבֹת עַל-בָּנִים עַל-שְׁלִשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים לְשָׁנָא י׃

You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I your God יהוה am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me.

וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֻפִּים לְאַהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי׃ {ס}
but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת-שֵׁם-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׂוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יִשָּׂא
אֶת-שְׁמוֹ לְשׂוּא׃ {פ}

You shall not swear falsely by the name of your God יהוה; for יהוה will not clear one who swears falsely by God's name.

זְכוֹר אֶת-יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ׃

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֶאכֶתְךָ׃

Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

וְיֹוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל-מְלֶאכֶה אַתָּה | וּבִנְךָ-
וּבִתֶּךָ עֹבְדֶיךָ וְאִמְתֶּךָ וּבַהֲמֹתֶיךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ׃

but the seventh day is a sabbath of your God יהוה: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements.

כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-
אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יְוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת
וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ׃ {ס}

For in six days יהוה made heaven and earth and sea—and all that is in them—and then rested on the seventh day; therefore יהוה blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

כַּבֵּד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכוּן יְמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ׃ {ס}

Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that your God יהוה is assigning to you.

לֹא תִרְצֹחַ:ח {ס} לֹא תִנְאַף:ף {ס} לֹא תִגְזֹב:ב {ס} לֹא־

You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

לֹא תִתְמַד בְּבֵית רֵעֶךָ {ס} לֹא־תִתְמַד אֶת־רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וְיֹרְשֵׁי
וְהַמְלִיכָה וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ:פ {ס}

You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your
neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox or ass, or anything that is
your neighbor's.

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ΚΑΙ ἐλάλησε Κύριος πάντας τοὺς λόγους τούτους λέγων·

2 ἐγὼ εἰμι Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου, ὅστις ἐξήγαγόν σε ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου,
ἐξ οἴκου δουλείας. 3 οὐκ ἔσονται σοι θεοὶ ἕτεροι πλὴν ἐμοῦ.

4 οὐ ποιήσεις σεαυτῷ εἰδωλον, οὐδὲ παντὸς ὁμοίωμα, ὅσα ἐν τῷ
οὐρανῷ ἄνω καὶ ὅσα ἐν τῇ γῆ κάτω καὶ ὅσα ἐν τοῖς ὕδασιν
ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς. 5 οὐ προσκυνήσεις αὐτοῖς, οὐδὲ μὴ λατρεύσεις
αὐτοῖς· ἐγὼ γάρ εἰμι Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου, Θεὸς ζηλωτῆς,
ἀποδιδοὺς ἀμαρτίας πατέρων ἐπὶ τέκνα, ἕως τρίτης καὶ τετάρτης
γενεᾶς τοῖς μισοῦσί με 6 καὶ ποιῶν ἔλεος εἰς χιλιάδας τοῖς
ἀγαπῶσί με καὶ τοῖς φυλάσσουσι τὰ προστάγματά μου.

7 οὐ λήψει τὸ ὄνομα Κυρίου τοῦ Θεοῦ σου ἐπί ματαίῳ· οὐ γὰρ μὴ
καθαρίσει Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου τὸν λαμβάνοντα τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ
ματαίῳ.

8 μνήσθητι τὴν ἡμέρα τῶν σαββάτων ἀγιάζειν αὐτήν. 9 ἕξ ἡμέρας
ἔργα καὶ ποιήσεις πάντα τὰ ἔργα σου· 10 τῇ δὲ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἑβδόμῃ
σάββατα Κυρίῳ τῷ Θεῷ σου· οὐ ποιήσεις ἐν αὐτῇ πᾶν ἔργον, σὺ
καὶ ὁ υἱός σου καὶ ἡ θυγάτηρ σου, ὁ παῖς σου καὶ ἡ παιδίσκη σου,
ὁ βοῦς σου καὶ τὸ ὑποζύγιόν σου καὶ πᾶν κτήνός σου καὶ ὁ
προσῆλυτος ὁ παροικῶν ἐν σοί. 11 ἐν γὰρ ἕξ ἡμέραις ἐποίησε

Κύριος τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ κατέπαυσε τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἐβδόμῃ· διὰ τοῦτο εὐλόγησε Κύριος τὴν ἡμέραν τὴν ἐβδόμην καὶ ἡγίασεν αὐτήν.

12 τίμα τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα σου, ἵνα εὖ σοι γένηται, καὶ ἵνα μακροχρόνιος γένη ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τῆς ἀγαθῆς, ἧς Κύριος ὁ Θεός σου δίδωσί σοι.

13 οὐ μοιχεύσεις.

14 οὐ κλέψεις.

15 οὐ φονεύσεις.

16 οὐ ψευδομαρτυρήσεις κατὰ τοῦ πλησίον σου μαρτυρίαν ψευδῆ.

17 οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ πλησίον σου. οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις τὴν οἰκίαν τοῦ πλησίον σου οὔτε τὸν ἀγρὸν αὐτοῦ οὔτε τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ οὔτε τὴν παιδίσκην αὐτοῦ οὔτε τοῦ βοῦς αὐτοῦ οὔτε τοῦ ὑποζυγίου αὐτοῦ οὔτε παντὸς κτήνους αὐτοῦ οὔτε ὅσα τῷ πλησίον σου ἐστί.

A brief outline of the history of Christian usage

First Century CE:

Reference in the synoptic gospels to story of man seeking to justify himself. Jesus says, “You know the commandments,” then recites a rough list of the “second table.” Note—not the “ten commandments” but simply “the commandments” (entolas in Greek, precepts, commands) Cf. Mark 10:19-22. So there was some idea of these “words” as commandments

Second and Third Century CE:

From an early third century text (Didascalia, 231) we can see that by the late second century there was use of what was already called the Ten

Commandments (deka entolai), and other but not all other texts in Torah, as a guide for Christian moral practice.

“The Law consists of the Ten commandments and the Judgments, which God spoke before the people had made the calf and had served idols.... in which there is no burden, or distinction of foods, or censings, or offerings of sacrifices and burnt offerings... Didascalia, Book VI, 16.

Didascalia would go on to note that the single doctrinal qualification for someone to be considered for election as bishop was that they could adequately distinguish between the First Legislation (Ten commandments and Judgments—moral law) and the Second Legislation (ceremonial law). The perspective here was that the First Legislation applies to Christians, while the Second does not, and, indeed, should not be imposed.

Exactly how to negotiate this boundary could and probably did vary from bishop to bishop. The case of abortion might be a good case in point. Christians in this time period appear to have been generally opposed to abortion in all cases. However, Numbers 5:11-31 specifically calls for abortion—via the ingestion of agents known to cause miscarriage-- in cases of marital infidelity that lead to pregnancy—administered by... a priest. So is this moral law, or ceremonial law? This is the kind of situation where a bishop would need to make a judgment call.

But back to the “Ten Commandments and the Judgments...” We have no direct evidence of exactly how these were used to establish moral practice in these Syrian Christian communities—only the evidence that apparently they were, since this role of discerning First from Second Legislation was clearly important at the time.

Fourth and Fifth Century

There is an “expanded edition” of Didascalia, known as the Apostolic Constitutions, released in 380, and which, like Didascalia, makes its way from Syria, to Egypt, and, unlike Didascalia, possibly to Rome (since it includes some additional materials that appear to have been from Rome). The expanded version is also edited, and in some places substantially. What doesn’t change from 231 to 380 is the doctrinal qualification for a candidate for the episcopacy—which remains being able to distinguish

between the First Legislation and the Second Legislation. The same references to the Ten Commandments and the Judgments appear here, too. This is thought to reflect the idea that the use of the Ten Commandments and other parts of Torah for basic moral instruction of Christians by some means remained an significant practice in the church, at least across the regions Apostolic Constitutions drew on and reached.

There is also reference to Augustine, prominent bishop of Hippo in North Africa in the 5th century, having used the Ten Commandments (labeled as such, but without further detail) in the moral instruction of those preparing to be baptized.

Tenth Century

We don't have a lot of evidence of the Ten Commandments being used directly for much of anything again in Western Christianity until the 10th century or so, when they start to appear in the liturgy during Lent as part of a penitential rite at the beginning of the service. That practice was preserved by Anglicans in their Book of Common Prayer, and is still often used during Lent by Episcopalians.

Sample from the 1979 BCP:

God spake these words, and said:

I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods but me.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law*

Honor thy father and thy mother.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Thou shalt do no murder.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Thou shalt not steal.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and incline our hearts to keep this law.*

Thou shalt not covet.

*Lord have mercy upon us,
and write all these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee.*

Sixteenth Century: Martin Luther, Church of England, Calvinism, and Catholic Response

Martin Luther emphasized the importance of both Law and Gospel in his reform of Christianity in Germany. The Law holds up a mirror that shows us where we are falling short of what calls us to. The Gospel announces mercy for our sin and grants the power for us to live in greater accord with God's will, announced in the Law. Luther developed two catechisms, the Small Catechism and the Large Catechism. Both included, prominently, indeed as the first items, a listing of the Ten Commandments and a brief explanation of how to apply each of them practically in daily life. The Small Catechism was intended to be reviewed regularly in homes as a means of

helping each Christian family grow in faith and faithfulness to God. The Large Catechism expanded on the material of the Small Catechism and was intended for use by pastors and other teachers of the faith in the church so they could support families who came to them with questions about anything in the Small Catechism.

In this study, Taylor will be drawing significantly though not exclusively from Luther's comments in the Large Catechism.

<https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/>

The Church of England largely preserved the essence of Luther's Small Catechism's comments on and approach to the Ten Commandments, but did not so clearly locate the focus of this teaching in homes. It was more individualized, and more focused on being able to produce the "right answers" rather than "right living," starting in the home itself.

The same is roughly true for the Heidelberg Catechism, 1563, developed by Calvinists in Heidelberg, Germany. Here, again, the focus is solely on the church. The catechism was divided into 52 sections so that one section of the Catechism could be taught to the church each Sunday of the year. The Ten Commandments here comprise not the beginning, as in Luther's catechisms principally for home use, but rather for weeks 34-44 of the year (roughly late August through early November), and precede several weeks of teaching on the Lord's Prayer.

<https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism#toc-the-ten-commandments>

The Catholic Church responded to the (accurate) critique of Protestants that emphasis on the Law of God, and particularly on the Ten Commandments, was largely missing except for the liturgy by including a section on the Ten Commandments in the revised version of its Catechism that came out of the Council of Trent (1566).

Twentieth Century to Present

What we largely see in Protestantism throughout the 20th century is a bit of a paradox. There is a widespread belief that the Ten Commandments are important and intended to be followed, but relatively little precise

knowledge of what they are or how they are to be applied. The rise of “Ten Commandments displays” in public locations in the US in the late 20th century is a prime example of this. We’re supposed to follow them somehow, but we may not be all that sure what they are.

This seems to track with what is reported to be a significant decline in home worship practices and religious instruction among Protestants generally—including among Lutherans. Church became the principal place of religious instruction and practice, not the home. The story is a bit more variable among American Catholics, depending on their country of origin, with some preserving robust religious practice and instruction at home, and others (especially those from or in Western Europe) generally not doing so. Individual practices are no longer as informed by official church documents (such as confessions or catechisms) but rather are chosen individually. There is no clear evidence of any particular focus on the Ten Commandments among these individual practices based on 21st century studies, such as those of the Pew Institute.

Part of the point of this study is to help us connect with the lively history of this text (Exodus 20) as it has come to us through both Judaism and Christianity over the centuries, and, for Christians in particular, with the early Christian practice of moral formation in the home and church, both, by reminding ourselves of the richest heritage of the use of the Ten Commandments (however configured) for that purpose.