

10

**COMMANDMENTS
RESEARCH BRIEF**

A Gift from Mark Driscoll Ministries

Prepared by a Research Team

For Other Free Leader Equipping visit

markdriscoll.org

10 COMMANDMENTS OVERVIEW

1. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS
2. BIBLIOGRAPHY
3. OUTLINES OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
4. DIFFERENCES IN TWO VERSIONS
5. WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EACH COMMANDMENT
6. LITERARY CONTEXT AND HEBREW IMPERATIVES
7. OLD TESTAMENT USAGE
8. NEW TESTAMENT USAGE
9. PARALLELS WITH MARRIAGE/COVENANT
10. ARCHITECTURE

1. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

1.1 RECOGNIZED IMPORTANCE

It has been said by more than one author and preacher that the Ten Commandments, along with Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer, are the three most well-known, recognizable, and memorized portions of the whole Bible. And of these three, that the Ten Commandments are the best known or most influential.

We live in an age and society that is very much anti-law (with the exception of laws that are against bigotry, racism, intolerance, or narrow-mindedness, in other words laws that are written for other people, not us). Mohler has said, "To live in this day is to live in an antinomian age, an age that is 'against all law.' Western society is addicted to minimal law and maximum flexibility."¹

Several authors note that in past generations, lists of rules or laws in a family or classroom were not just commonplace but seen as completely necessary, such as "don't pull your sister's hair," "

¹ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Words from the Fire: Hearing the Voice of God in the 10 Commandments* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), p. 29.

clean the table after every meal,” or “eat what is put on your plate,” or “listen quietly in class and speak only when spoken to.”

1.2 UNIQUENESS

Commentators also note the uniqueness of the Ten Commandments. Though some give lists of 5-8 items that are unique, the main points are:

1. The expression “face to face” (Deut 5:4). The Ten Commandments, in the Deuteronomy version, are said to be given, “face to face,” that is, in the most direct kind of communication/revelation from Yahweh. This expression is rare in the Bible, occurring only 13 times (7 times used of God and man, with the other 6 being from one human to another, such as Paul talking about how he interacts with the church at Corinth when here is there in person). Interestingly, in the Old Testament God only spoke to Moses “face to face” (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10). But in the New Jerusalem believers will see the “face” of Jesus (Rev. 22:4), and the “face” of Jesus is, according to Paul in 2 Cor 3-4, where knowledge and light and glory fully reside (“face” occurs in 2 Cor 4:6).²
2. The Ten Commandments are given twice, “once in the narrative of the events at Sinai (Exod. 20) and again when Moses recalls those events as the people prepare to go into the land (Deut. 5).”³
3. The Ten Commandments are placed in the center of the whole tabernacle (and later Temple), that is, in the Holy of Holies, and then in the Ark of the Covenant.
4. This is one of the few places in the Bible (some say the only place) where God speaks to the whole assembly of Israel, His people (Deut 5:1).

1.3 MOVIES

One of the first movies people think of regarding the Ten Commandments, at least in older generations, is *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston (1956). Adjusted for inflation, this movie would have made, in 2012, would have grossed over \$1 billion.

The movie *Chariots of Fire* (1981) has its lead character clearly believing in what is often called a “transfer theology,” that is, that the commandment to honor the Sabbath day has moved, with the resurrection of Christ, from the seventh day to the first day. Therefore what used to be true of the seventh-day Sabbath is now true of the first-day Sabbath. In this movie, more specifically, refraining from work.

² 2 Cor 3-4 is a key passage on the new covenant, and how it supercedes the Mosaic law.

³ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2009), p. 3.

Michael Moore did a TV documentary series called *The Awful Truth* (1999-2000), which in one episode included the demeaning of congressman who were at that time proposing legislation to display (or keep displayed) the Ten Commandments. See 2:00 mark of the YouTube clip below:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3MSi3uf8GA>

1.4 NAMES FOR TEN COMMANDMENTS

Aside from our English term “Decalogue” (Greek for “ten words,” see below), one of the main biblical terms for what we call the Ten Commandments is the “ten words.” Block states in relation to the verses that refer to the Ten Commandments as “ten words” (and more verses that talk about them as “words”):

The Hebrew word *dabar* bears a wide range of meanings: “word,” “statement,” “message,” “object,” “event.” Especially when used with the cognate verb, *dibber*, “to speak,” the emphasis is on communication. The preference for *debarim*, “words,” in these narratives highlights the revelation of the Decalogue as a communicative, rather than a specifically legislative, event.

The phrase ‘*aseret haddebarim*, “ten words,” occurs for the first time in Exodus 34:28 and twice more in Moses’ recollection of the original events in Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4. No matter how deeply entrenched is the tradition of rendering the phrase as “the ten commandments,” here translators should follow the lead of the LXX, which translates the expression literally as *deka logous*, “ten words,” in Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 10:4, and *deka rhemata*, “ten declarations,” in Deuteronomy 4:13. The phrase is best interpreted as shorthand for “the ten principles of covenant relationship.”

This raises the question why the Decalogue should consist of ten declarations. Why not seven, the typological number of completeness, or twelve, a typological number tightly associated with Israel. Admittedly, ten also functions as a typological number in the Torah, but it seems more likely that the reason for ten is mnemonic: to facilitate memorization and recitation. If the number of principles intentionally corresponds to the finger on one’s hands, then the Decalogue was composed to function as a sort of catechism, summarizing the essence of covenant relationship.⁴

1.5 INITIAL THOUGHTS ON OUTLINE/STRUCTURE

These are simply some concise thoughts on the structure of the Ten Commandments .

The Ten Commandments seem to be in two halves, the first five, which are vertical (man’s relationship with God), and the last five, which are horizontal (human relationships). This seems

⁴ Daniel I. Block, “The Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures,” pp. 1-27, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 4-5.

to be confirmed, in part, by three literary/grammatical/syntactical aspects: (1) the first five commands have “The LORD your God” in them, while this phrase is not found at all in the last five; (2) the last five have the same structure: they all start with a negated Hebrew imperfect (the way of forming a negative imperative); and (3) In Hebrew, the last set of five commands are joined by the conjunction waw (pronounced vav), see notes below in this brief in section 5.

The structure of the Ten Commandments is not just 5 + 5, but the whole text begins with God’s name (Exod 20:2) and ends with, the very last word (in Hebrew and English), “neighbor” (Exod 20:17).

Looking at how something begins and ends is one way of looking for key parts. The “middle” of a text is also a good place to look for emphasis. And in the Ten Commandments the Sabbath is often considered to be the “middle.” One way of seeing emphasis is how much time an author spends on a topic, and the Sabbath is the longest of the commands. It is also the only one worded both positively (“Remember ... to keep holy”) and negatively (“you shall not work ...”).

1.6 MEMORIZATION

As noted in the quote above from Block, it is possible that the number ten corresponds to ten fingers.

Example of use rhyme to help memorize the Ten Commandments (McGuffey Readers were graded primers used in American schools from 1836 into the middle of the twentieth century):

The Ten Commandments in Verse (from McGuffey's Reader)

Above all else love God alone;
Bow down to neither wood nor stone.
God's name refuse to take in vain;
The Sabbath rest with care maintain.
Respect your parents all your days;
Hold sacred human life always.
Be loyal to your chosen mate;
Steal nothing, neither small nor great.
Report, with truth, your neighbor's deed;
And rid your mind of selfish greed.

The Sum of the Commandments

With all your soul love God above,
And as yourself your neighbor love.

2. BIBLIOGRAPHY

This will consist of topical books (article and commentaries will appear occasionally in this brief, but in footnotes).

Carson, D.A., ed.

1999 From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation. Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999. 444 Pp.

This is a scholarly work, some chapters, for example, having well over 200 footnotes. Per the subtitle, most of the chapters in the first two-thirds are biblical/theological, and the chapters in the last third historical (tracing the practice of the Sabbath from the second century on through the Puritans). Though this edited work was not put together in response to Samuele Bacchiocchi's *From Sabbath to Sunday*, published in 1977, Bacchiocchi's book is referred to about 60 times throughout, far more than any other author, ancient or modern.

Clowney, Edmund P.

2007 How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing. 161 Pp.

This is a very much a devotional/applicational book. It is not, as the title might suggest, an exegetical work on the parts of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus addresses the Ten Commandments (though there are certainly parts where Clowney does discuss the Sermon on the Mount). In short, Clowney goes through each of the ten commandments, one per chapter, and offers whatever insights come to mind. Some examples: For the first commandment, he goes through some of the different names for God and then notes how these all apply to Jesus. For the fifth commandment he talks about "family living" and notes how the church, as the family of God, can fit into this commandment. For the seventh commandment Clowney talks about purity in marriage. For the eighth commandment he talks about how true treasure is that which is stored up in heaven. And for the ninth commandment, he talks about being a witness to the power of God like the apostles were in the book of Acts. Some of these applications, implications, extensions, and illustrations do come from the teachings of Jesus (as the title of the book promises), but many do not.

Donato, Christopher John, ed.

2011 Perspectives on the Sabbath: Four Views. Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman. 420 Pp.

The four "perspectives" presented are (1) the seventh-day Sabbath (presented by what appears to be a seventh-day Adventist theologian); (2) the Christian Sabbath view (or "first-day" Sabbath), in which we are still under the Sabbath law (of the Ten Commandments) but it has been transferred to the first day; (3) Luther's perspective of the Sabbath (a chapter that doesn't really seem to fit with this book, which appears to be a

book designed after the Zondervan publisher's "Four Views" series), and (4) "The Sabbath as Fulfilled in Christ," that is, we are not bound by the Sabbath law anymore.

Greenman, Jeffrey P., and Larsen, Timothy, eds.

2012 The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 239 Pp.

The cost of this book is easily recovered in just the first two chapters, Block's outstanding chapter on the Decalogue in the OT and Evan's very well-done chapter in the Decalogue in the NT. After these two are chapters on the early church fathers, chapters devoted to Luther, Calvin, and Owen, Wesley, Barth, and others.

Hauerwas, Stanley M., and Willimon, William.

1999 The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 144 Pp.

This is a purely devotional book. Each chapter covers one commandment, and is divided up into a devotional section (a series of devotionals of a few paragraphs), and an explanation/applicational section. But overall even this second section is too brief for any substantive exegetical notes. Since the chapters are short they could easily be read by someone who simply wishes to read some daily thoughts about each commandment, similar to something that is a little more in length than a Daily Bread style reading.

Miller, Patrick D.

2009 The Ten Commandments. Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press. 477 Pp.

Like Rooker (see below) this is a good introductory book on the ten commandments that is both exegetical and applicational, though the emphasis is clearly on the applicational side. However, Miller is not concise (as Rooker is), i.e., this work could have been about half the length without losing anything substantive. One of the purposes of the book is to "explore their [the ten commandments'] resonances and reflections in the rest of Scripture: more particularly, how each commandment is picked up in other contexts" (p. xii). Miller does this, a lot, but it seems without parameters. For instance, in the chapter on the first commandment Miller access a number of passages that are about idolatry (from the wandering the wilderness to the conquest of the land to Elijah's confrontation in 1 Kings 18). In other words whether the author intended us to think of the first commandment or not, account are mentioned. Or with the fifth commandment, Joseph is mentioned in Genesis as an illustration of one who cares for his father. Ruth (in caring for Naomi) and Noah's sons (in dishonoring Noah when he was drunk) are also mentioned. Another example would be the seventh commandment. Though the commandment clearly deals with adultery, Miller has a section on divorce as a related topic.

Mohler, R. Albert, Jr.

2009 Words from the Fire: Hearing the Voice of God in the 10 Commandments.
Chicago: Moody. 200 Pp.

This can properly be labeled as a devotional/applicational book and not an exegetical book. For instance, Mohler doesn't look at what "in vain" meant in that time and day (third commandment), but he discusses several ways in which we are guilty of breaking this commandment. Another example: for the fifth commandment, he is so applicational as to discuss spanking as a means of disciplining children (pp. 104-105). He mentions the Hebrew form of a word only very briefly and very generally, only three times throughout the book (pp. 113, 116, and 193).

Rooker, Mark F.

2010 The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century (Nashville:
Broadman & Holman. 234 Pp.

Of the books on the ten commandments surveyed in this brief, Rooker's book is by far the best. After an introduction there are ten chapters, one per commandment. Space doesn't allow for great detail at times. With the text at just under 200 pages, some sections end up being fairly short. For instance, the section titled, "Did Sunday Replace the Sabbath" is just five paragraphs (roughly one page). But Rooker interacts with Hebrew, and interacts with other bibliography (each page has an average of 2-3 footnotes). And with all the cross-references in Scripture that one could cite or discuss in any of the given commandments, Rooker confines himself to those that are more directly related to that commandment.

Ryken, Philip Graham.

2003 Written in Stone: The Ten Commandments and Today's Moral Crisis.
Phillipsburg NJ: P&R Publishing. 240 Pp.

As the subtitle might indicate, this is a devotional and applicational book. Examples and illustrations are pulled from Scripture (for the first commandment, five pages are used looking at Solomon as an example of someone who disobeyed this command). Illustrations also come from American history or church history (such as Luther or the Puritans). Usually Ryken mentions a common view on the meaning of each commandment and works though these rather quickly to get to applicational thoughts. For instance, in the third commandment he mentions 4-5 things that this (misusing God's name) could be, without actually exegeting the expression to tell us what it meant to the ancient Israelite readers. For the Sabbath command, he talks about how life is often rushed and stressful, and that God wants a rhythm of work and rest, but implies (even states) that the Sabbath has moved from the seventh to the first day, and thus that we are to obey the command, without supporting this view. Or with seventh, he talks about sex, lust, the role of husbands and wives (Eph 5), and pornography, since again this is primarily a book on applicational thoughts derived from each commandment. Each

chapter has some interaction with other authors (each chapter has an average of 10 endnotes), but such interaction with other bibliography is really just in passing.

3. OUTLINES OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

3.1 PROLOGUE (EXOD 20:1-2)

See below in this brief (section 6.1) for how this fits into the structure.

3.2 GENERAL COMMENT ON ORDER

Rooker states:

The commandments give every indication of being arranged in a hierarchical order. The obligations of man before God precede matters between men. Even within the first five commandments there is a hierarchy: the obligation to correctly worship God precedes the duty to honor His name, and both of these injunctions precede honoring His holy day. Each of these injunctions contains the phrase “the Lord our God.” There is also hierarchical order among the five ethical commandments: the value of life, the marriage bond, the right to private possession, reliability of public testimony, and the prohibition of guilty desires. This final commandment aims at preventing murder, adultery, stealing, and false witness. It is rightly seen that the parental law is pivotal as one moves from obligations to God to obligations to fellow human beings and society. The transitional nature of the fifth commandment explains why there is debate whether this commandment should be read with the previous four and why some traditions believe it was listed with the previous four on the first tablet of the Decalogue.⁵

3.3 PRIORITY OF VERTICAL OVER HORIZONTAL IN THE 5 + 5 DIVISION

Let’s assume for the moment the mainline Protestant division (the Lutheran tradition is the exception) of two halves of five commandments each, the first having to do with vertical relationships and the second with horizontal.

⁵ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 20.

The structure of the Ten Commandments is not just 5 + 5, but the whole text begins with God's name (Exod 20:2) and ends with, the very last word (in Hebrew and English), "neighbor" (Exod 20:17), a further confirmation of "God first, neighbor second."

That the last five commandments go together is also confirmed by three literary/grammatical/syntactical aspects: (1) the first five commands have "The LORD your God" in them, while this phrase is not found at all in the last five; (2) the last five have the same structure: they all start with a negated Hebrew imperfect (the way of forming a negative imperative); and (3) In Hebrew, the last set of five commands are joined by the conjunction *waw* (pronounced *vav*).

One issue must be addressed. The command for children to obey parents (command #5) seems to fit with the horizontal not vertical.

However, we've already noted the three linguistic/literary pieces of evidence for the last five commands going together, not to mention a more symmetrical division if we have 5 + 5. Most scholars think that a knowledge of the culture of ancient Israel helps to bridge the gap here. The idea is that, in the home, for children and youth, their view of God is what they get from parents. Where in American evangelical culture, many parents do not have "family worship" and relegate (whether intentional or unintentional) teaching about God to Sunday School teachers, and later, youth pastors and para-church ministry leaders, there were no weekly church services for the Israelites to attend (the weekly synagogue meeting came about in the intertestamental period).

Therefore, the way that children in ancient Israel obeyed God was, literally, to obey parents.

Here's a great illustration from our day that points out this concept:

In a Sunday school class, the children were asked to use their imaginations and draw a picture of God. There were a variety of depictions. One boy drew a rainbow to represent God as Creator; a girl drew an old man with a long beard sitting on a throne up in the clouds. Another boy drew God in a way that made Him look remarkably like Superman. However, perhaps the best effort came from a girl, who said, "I didn't know what God looked like, so I just drew a picture of my daddy."⁶

Rooker states:

Many argue that the two-tablet tradition demands we see the parental law as belonging to the first Decalogue table. The parents are viewed in the Decalogue as representatives of God and not merely as neighbors. In what might be the oldest comment on the Decalogue (Lev 19), the parental law could be viewed as belonging to the first table because it is listed ahead of the fourth commandment, on observing the Sabbath law (Lev 19:3). The first table was believed to contain

⁶ It's hard to track the origin of this illustration—it's appeared in several websites, among them: <http://www.catholicjournal.us/2013/03/05/raising-heroic-children-in-an-anti-heroic-age-pt-3/>

the commandments more directly related to one's relationship with God. In Lev 19:3, the meaning of the parental law has been intensified by the use of the verb *yr'* ("fear") rather than *kbd* ("honor"): "Each of you is to respect (lit. fear; *yr'*) his mother and father." This verb is normally reserved as an expression of a person's response to God.⁷

Finally, in reference to the first set of give commands, some scholars think that the phrase at the end of the fifth commandment ("that you may live a long life in the land that the Lord your God is giving you") refers to all first five commandments. That is, it closes the whole first table of the law.

3.4 DIVISIONS OTHER THAN 5 + 5

The Roman Catholic division of the Ten Commandments is:

1. I am the LORD your God; you will not have strange god before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the LORD's Day.
4. Honor your father and mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall no steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

This division is based on repetition of the word "covet" in Deut 5:21 (using the Deut, not Exod, version to see the two words as evidence for dividing the commandment up into coveting humans versus property), as well as the similarity of what in Protestant traditions are the first two commands.

May states (above list of ten):

⁷ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 12.

According to this tradition (also followed in the Lutheran tradition), the first three commandments, which have to do with our obligations to God, were inscribed on the “first tablet” that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai according to Exodus or Horeb according to Deuteronomy, whereas the final seven, which concern our obligations to our neighbor, were inscribed on the second of the tablet.⁸

Note the stained glass below from St. Paul Cathedral, Pittsburgh, which reflects this division of the Ten Commandments:



The usual division that Protestants (except for Lutheran) know, that is, the 5 + 5 division outlined above, is sometimes called the “reformed,” division.

3.5 EACH OF THE TWO TABLES AS CONTAINING ALL TEN (THUS IDENTICAL)

⁸ William E. May, “John Paul II and Benedict XVI,” pp. 211-227, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 212.

It is common in pictures of the Ten Commandments (whether held in Charlton Heston's hands in the 1956 movie, or displayed in courthouses or in small representations on pastor's desks) to portray the Ten Commandments as the first five commandments on the first table or tablet, and the last five on the second tablet.

But this is likely entirely mistaken. Several scholars have noted that it was common in an important covenant between two parties to copy the covenant, and place a copy in an important place in each of the two kingdoms.

Meredith Kline is among those holding this view:

<http://www.meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/ten-commandments-new-bible-dictionary/>

See also his article from which this website is based upon.⁹

Block states, referring to work by Kline:

Longstanding tradition has it that the first of the two tablets contained those commands that deal with Israel's vertical relationship to God, and that the second dealt with horizontal relationships. While devotionally and homiletically interesting, this interpretation is without exegetical or contextual foundation. The need for two stone tablets accords with ancient Near Eastern practice of providing each party to a covenant with a copy of the agreement.¹⁰

3.6 "V"-SHAPED

Expanding on the ideas raised above, it is possible to chart the Ten Commandments in several ways. The first is a "V-shaped" trajectory, based in part on the importance of the first and last commandments.

Rooker states:

The tenth commandment is also unique in other ways. For example, it is the only commandment that is repeated, with the use of *hmd* twice in Exod 20:17 and *hmd* and *'awa* in Deut 5:21. This repetition may demonstrate that this, the last of the Ten Commandments, is of extraordinary importance. One aspect of its importance is evident from that fact that, in contrast with the other commandments that address outward acts, the tenth commandment uniquely addresses a person's

⁹ Meredith G. Kline, "The Two Tables of the Covenant," WTJ 22:2 (1960), pp. 133-146.

¹⁰ Daniel I. Block, "The Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures," pp. 1-27, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 12

thoughts and desires. It thus addresses attitudes that are less overtly violent and injurious, yet it is the commandment most at the root of covenant disobedience in that it logically precedes the rest. It is to be a restraint upon evil desires before they prevail.¹¹

We might word things this way: What is the best deterrent to sin? Worship of God. What goes along with this positive exhortation (worship God, worship Christ, follow Him and grow in passion for Him)? Staying away from things this will rob us of a passion for Christ, i.e., commands worded negatively (don't covet, and don't do things that coveting leads to, such as theft or adultery).

This is a multi-level approach to sanctification, or the pursuit of holiness. As human beings are by nature sinful, rebellious, selfish, and weak. And therefore it is helpful to have motivations, exhortations, examples in more than one area.

Miller states:

With the commandment against false witness, the covenantal requirements for living with one's neighbor move from dominant concern for actions to an explicit focus on words and speaking. It would be a mistake, however, to see this movement as one from more serious matters to lesser concerns. Quite the contrary. The prohibition against bearing false witness is not so much a general rule against lying as it is a guard against the capacity of words and speaking to endanger one's neighbor in various ways, or indeed, to bring about violation of the commandments that precede this one.¹²

¹¹ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 172.

¹² Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2009), p. 343.

Here's how this might be charted:

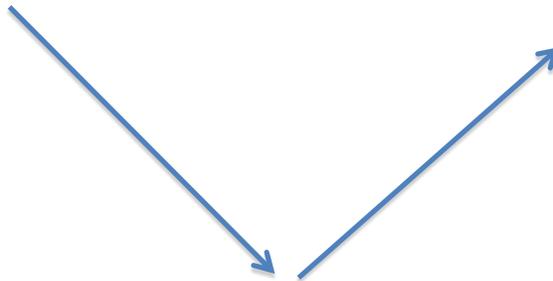
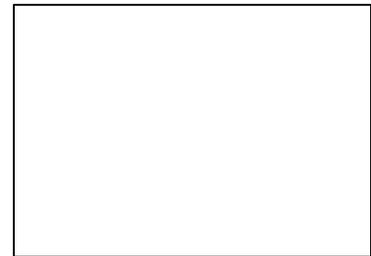
C = Command

C1 is internal, CC2-5 are external
(or at least they can be measured or
observed externally)

C10 is internal, CC 6-9
are external.

C1: No other gods. This
is the foundation: there is
a God, there is only one
God, and no others exist
or are needed.

~~C5 = transitional since it~~
involved both God and
humans, i.e, both vertical
and horizontal relationships
(the parents are God's
representatives).



CC2-5 flow from C1: they explain, qualify, and offer commentary on C1. For instance, to make sure there are no other gods, make sure there are no visual representations. Make sure that in conversations God's name is feared/worshipped. Make sure in the weekly cycle and rhythm if life God is feared/worshipped. Make sure that His most basic representatives (parents, not priests) are feared and obeyed.

CC6-9 flow from C10: In C10, seven things (the number for completion) are listed that we are not to covet. As we move away from C10 the sins that flow from coveting (unhealthy or ungodly desires/passions) become more serious. First, coveting leads to a turning away from truth-telling (not stating what is true about neighbors), then it can lead to stealing (taking what is not ours, with a focus probably on possessions). It can lead to a desire and taking of something much greater than an item, namely a wife that belong to someone else. Finally it can lead to the worst kind of taking and usurping of our desires over others, the sinful taking of a life.

3.7 KEY COMMANDS

We've already mentioned the first and last as key commands. The Sabbath is also thought by some to be the key center command. In large part this is due to the fact that this is the longest command, i.e., more words are devoted to this command than any of the others.

Rooker states:

The central commandment in terms of elaboration and detail is the fourth, the Sabbath law.¹³

This can lead to a second way of outlining the Ten Commandments, based on large and small blocks. Miller states:

The third way Deuteronomy makes the Sabbath Commandment the center of the Decalogue is structural: it creates five literary blocks or segments, of which the Fourth Commandment is the central block. In other words, the Decalogue in Deuteronomy divides into five parts: a long word, a short word, a long word, a short word, a long word. The first part—the Prologue, the First and Second Commandments—is a long block having to do with the proper worship of the Lord and where the first-person reference to the Deity is evident. The second part is the short Third Commandment. The third and central part is the long Sabbath Commandment. The fourth, and short part is the commandment about the parents, and the fifth long part is the sequence of commandments about the neighbor. While these all seem very short, Deuteronomy has linked them into a single word or part by connecting them with conjunctions, reflected in the NRSV's repeated

¹³ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 176.

“neither,” to say in effect that this is one long word with several components. So the Sabbath in this way is not simply one on the list but is the pivotal longer statement at the center, serving also as a bridge between the two tablets of the Commandments.¹⁴

This (the Sabbath command) is also the only command worded positive and negatively.

Here’s how this view of blocks of material would look:

EXODUS 20

LONG PART: PROLOGUE AND C ##1-2

2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery
3 You shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

SHORT PART: C #3

7 You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

LONG PART: C #4

8 Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

SHORT PART: C #5

¹⁴ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2009), p. 129.

12 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

LONG PART: C ##6-10 (ABOUT NEIGHBORS)

13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Also, it is clear that the two “middle” commands of the Ten are the fourth and fifth. Both of these are the only ones worded positively.

COMMANDMENT #4

8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

COMMANDMENT #5

12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Each of these has its own unique attributes. With the Sabbath command, as mentioned it is the only command to be worded both positively and negatively (“Remember” and “keep holy,” and “do not do any work”). With the command to honor parents, it is the only command to have a motivation clause (“that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you”).

And though command #5 is the only one with a true motivation clause, both of these commands have elements of motivation. Miller states, of Sabbath:

Not surprisingly, in both versions of the commandment there is a story feature in the motivation clauses that follow the command: in Exodus the story of God’s creation of the world and in Deuteronomy the story of God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery. The importance of remembering these stories and the practice arising from them is underscored in the rationale given in Deuteronomy, and the

logic of the Deuteronomic version is evident. One “keeps” the Sabbath (v. 12) in order to “remember” the redemption (v. 15 ...).¹⁵

Finally, another way to perhaps see which of the commands are key is to see which have the most differences between the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions (see chart below in section 5). The thought here is that Moses in Deuteronomy may have been inclined to offer interpretations and commentary on those commands that are more central to belief and community life.

If this is true, then the commandment that has the most variation is the fourth, on Sabbath keeping.

4. DIFFERENCES IN TWO VERSIONS

There are clearly differences between the two versions of the Ten Commandments. Rooker states:

Between the two versions of the Ten Commandments in the Pentateuch (Exod 20:2-17; Deut 5:6-21) at least 20 differences have been noted.¹⁶

The book of Deuteronomy has changes that reflect concerns in three areas: (1) protecting or guarding what has been commanded (see commandment #4 in the chart below as an example); (2) qualifying or explaining a command, or providing a motivation¹⁷; and (3) looking back on experience in Egypt.

Regarding the third area just listed, Rooker states:

This remembrance of the nation’s experience in Egypt is a common theme in Deuteronomy. Because the Israelites were mistreated in Egypt, they should act charitably and kindly toward slaves and the needy (Deut 15:15; 16:12; 24:18,22).¹⁸

¹⁵ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2009), p. 119.

¹⁶ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁷ The fifth commandment is likely an example of this, since adding the phrase “that it may go well with you” is found often in the wisdom literature of Proverbs. I.e., Moses (and God) add in an element of motivation from wisdom.

¹⁸ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), pp. 83-84.

Here are the differences:

NO.	EXOD 20	DEUT 5	COMMENTS
Prologue	<p>Exod 20:1-2</p> <p>The real Prologue, Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6, is identical.</p>	<p>Deut 5:1-6</p> <p>Moses looks back at the first giving at Sinai. Verse 5 is emphatic: God spoke “face to face” with “you” (the “you” is plural, as in the people).</p> <p>The Prologue proper, Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6, is identical.</p>	<p>Deut explains the significance of the Ten Words.</p>
1.	<p>Exod 20:3</p> <p>No difference.</p>	<p>Deut 5:7</p> <p>No difference.</p>	

2.	<p>Exod 20:4-6</p> <p>Exod 20:4 has the conjunction “and/or” (Hebrew waw): “image or any likeness.”</p>	<p>Deut 5:8-10</p> <p>Deut 5:8 does not have the conjunction (see Exod): “image of any likeness” (though many translations supply the “or” between “image” and “likeness”).</p>	<p>Deut may be clarifying, trying to remove the chance for confusion. The conjunction in Exod may be epexegetical, that is, “an image, that is to say, any likeness (of any kind).” Deut may fear that the conjunction waw might be taken another way (for instance, prohibiting things that are only both an image and a likeness, taking the conjunction as something that adds an element instead of repeating and explaining the same element).</p>
3.	<p>Exod 20:7</p> <p>No difference.</p>	<p>Deut 5:11</p> <p>No difference.</p>	
4.	<p>Exod 20:8-11</p> <p>Verb (that starts the whole verse) is Hebrew zachar, “remember”</p> <p>The remembrance (20:11) is creation.</p> <p>The list in 20:10 of who does not do work is seven items, which is likely intentional to go with the seven days of creation.</p>	<p>Deut 5:12-15</p> <p>Verb (that starts the whole verse) is Hebrew shamar, “observe”</p> <p>Deut adds: “just as the Lord God commanded you.”</p> <p>The remembrance (5:15) is the exodus.</p> <p>The list in 5:14 is not 7 items (as in Exod): the animals are more specified, and the servants are repeated for emphasis.</p>	<p>The verb in Deut is close in meaning, but has more the connotation of guarding and protecting. The Exod verb is a little more celebrative and active.</p> <p>More emphasis in Deut in on exodus, in the remembrance clause and the repetition of the servants in 5:14. The Israelites were once servants so they need to treat their own servants well. This is likely similar to a running commentary. It does not negate the creation emphasis of Exod, but gives another reason for honoring the Sabbath.</p>

5.	Exod 20:12	<p>Deut 5:16</p> <p>Deut adds: “just as the Lord God commanded you” (5:16).</p> <p>Deut adds: “that it may go well with you” to the promise of long life.</p>	<p>Deut expands the commandment. Some scholars see the motivation clause (“that your days may be long ...”) as applying not just to the fifth commandment but to the first five as a set. If so, this might be more reason for Deut to emphasize the importance of the vertical commandments (the ones that honor God), since Deut as a book is so much about the concept of covenant.</p>
6.	<p>Exod 20:13</p> <p>No difference.</p>	<p>Deut 5:17</p> <p>No difference.</p>	
7.	Exod 20:14	<p>Deut 5:18</p> <p>Deut adds the conjunction “and,” which links this to the previous commandment (and helps link these last five commandments as a set).</p>	
8.	Exod 20:15	<p>Deut 5:19</p> <p>Deut adds the conjunction “and,” which links this to the previous commandment (and helps link these last five commandments as a set).</p>	

9.	Exod 20:16	<p>Deut 5:20 Heb. shav' is in place of (Exod) Heb. sheqer.</p> <p>Deut adds the conjunction "and," which links this to the previous commandment (and helps link these last five commandments as a set).</p>	<p>These two terms, Heb. shav' and Heb. sheqer, are parallel in Ps 144:8. This could be an attempt in Deut to link with the third commandment, since shav' occurs in 5:11. This could also be a qualification in Deut: shav' is seen by some to be a little more general than sheqer: sheqer indicates evil intent, but shav' would entail that but also include testimony that is just worthless or misleading. An example might be someone who claims to have knowledge of a crime but really doesn't and just wants the spotlight in a trial. His lack of knowledge eventually comes to light, and no direct harm is done. Yet at the same time all involved are upset at the waste of time due to the testimony that ended up being utterly useless.</p>
----	------------	--	--

10.	<p>Exod 20:17</p> <p>Exods has the verb chamad twice.</p>	<p>Deut 5:21</p> <p>Deut has chamad once, and in the second instance uses the verb 'awah.</p> <p>Deut adds the conjunction "and," which links this to the previous commandment (and helps link these last five commandments as a set).</p>	<p>Duet probably puts a different verb as the second verb due to qualification or commentary, possibly to expand the objects of coveting. Both Hebrew verbs don't occurs that often, and seem to have a stronger sense that just "want": Hebrew 'awah occurs a total of 26 times in OT, and the verb chamad occurs a total of 21 times. Hebrew 'awah is a strong desire, or craving, as in the people's longing for meat in Num 11:4 or David's longing for water in 2 Sam 23:15. Hebrew chamad is also a strong desire, and is in itself neutral (one can desire, using chamad, good things). But it can be used of a strong desire for people or things we should not want, such as the evil woman in Prov 6:25 or things associated with idols in Isa 44:9. Also see below in this brief, section 6.10.</p>
-----	---	--	--

5. WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EACH COMMANDMENT

5.1 PROLOGUE AND FIRST COMMANDMENT

Exod 20:2-3

- 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery
- 3 You shall have no other gods before me.

First, the phrase “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” is called a hymnic element. This has nothing to do with a hymn in the sense of music, but rather with the lyrics we often find in hymns—deeper doctrinal thoughts on the character and attributes of God.

When a speaker or author mentioned the word “God” or His name (“Yahweh” or “Jesus”), the speaker pauses to give God glory before continuing with the sentence. Kind of like a parentheses. So, you often find two commas, as in “May God, who is powerful beyond our comprehension, help you through this sickness.”

Can you see how, grammatically, the italicized part is not necessary for the sentence? In other words, the sentence could have just read “May God help you through this sickness.” Instead, the speaker pauses to reflect on God's power.

Here's one example in the Bible:

Genesis 14:19,

”Blessed be Abram of God most high, lord of heaven and earth, and blessed be God most high, who has delivered your enemies into our hand.”

Instead of just saying, “Blessed be Abram of God,” the minute the speaker (Melchizedek) says the word “God,” he pauses to give God praise.

This hymnic element, “lord of heaven and earth” (sometimes instead of “lord” translations may have “creator” or “possessor”) is taken up and used by several people after this occurrence in Genesis 14. So this is just one of many cool things about hymnic elements—we can sometimes trace the thread of a hymnic element through Scripture. People later in Genesis, some of the prophets, and even Jesus himself uses this hymnic element.

Often the speaker will key the hymnic element into the situation. In other words, hymnic elements are not usually picked at random. There is rather a reason for picking the particular attribute of God that is focused on.

Here's an example from the Bible that illustrates this aspect of hymnic elements:

Nehemiah 1:5-6

And I said, “I beseech Thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, (6) let Thine ear now be attentive ...” Most of verse 5 is a hymnic element, in which Nehemiah reminds perhaps everyone (himself, anyone hearing him, and maybe even God) how powerful, and faithful, God is. (some other good examples of hymnic elements are Hezekiah’s prayer in 2 Kings 19:15, and the start of the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6:9).

Paul also in this letters in the New Testament will sometimes hit the word “Father” or “Son” and he just can’t help but break into a hymn (of words). Note how this happens, for instance, in Col. ch. 1 or Ephesians 1.

The second thing to note regarding the prologue (Exod 20:2) is the use of both indicatives and imperatives.

Exod 20:2 as the start of the Ten Commandments is clearly along these lines: truth first, affirmation about God first, then imperatives (many of which also contain truth and are not simply commands).

On to the first commandments then, Exod 20:3: clearly this is a key commandment, and if we had to pick one of the ten this might well be it. It is key both due to its position (first) and content (the worship of God and God alone).

The Hebrew wording in the first commandment is clearly relational:

Rooker states:

The Hebrew formula *lo’ yihyeh (le)* (“do not have”) means to keep or refrain from having a relationship with. The positive (nonnegated) statement *yihyeh (le)* was a common idiom for the establishment of a marriage. The positive statement later became the formulaic expression for the unique covenant relationship between God and Israel, as the terminology for marriage became the classical terminology for Israel’s covenant relationship with God. The most intimate of all relationships on the human plane became the analogy for God’s intimate relationship with His people. This commandment implies that there may be no third parties in the person’s relationship with God, just as there may be no intruding third parties in a marriage.¹⁹

And of course quotes (such as Calvin’s quote that we as humans are perpetual idol factories) are appropriate as well here. Mohler states:

Why are sinful human beings born idolaters? The reason is simple—we must worship, we will worship. Even as nature abhors a vacuum, so does the human

¹⁹ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 25.

soul. The human soul will find an object of worship, either on the shelf, on the altar, in the mirror, or in heaven. We are born idolaters.²⁰

N.T. Wright notes that in 1 Cor 8:4-6:

Paul ... has glossed “God” with “the Father,” and “Lord” with “Jesus Christ,” adding in each case an explanatory phrase: “God” is the Father, “from whom are all things and we to him” and the “Lord” is Jesus the Messiah, “through whom are all things and we through him.” There can be no mistake: just as in Philippians 2 and Colossians 1, Paul has placed Jesus within an explicit statement, drawn from the Old Testament’s quarry of emphatically monotheistic texts, of the doctrine that Israel’s God is the one and only God, the creator of the world.²¹

5.2 SECOND COMMANDMENT

4 You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The first commandment is inward, the second is outward. Much of Deut 4 seems to be a sermon on this second commandment.

Two key terms are “image” (Hebrew *pesel*) and “likeness” (Hebrew *tenumah*). There are two views on these terms:

1. The first (*pesel*, “image”) is three-dimensional (such as a representational statue), and the second (*temumah*, “likeness”) is two-dimensional (such as a drawing on a flat surface).
2. The two terms are roughly synonymous, and any original nuance to one or the other cannot be determined. The sense of using the two would then mean “any kind of idol.”

5.3 THIRD COMMANDMENT

7 You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not

²⁰ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Words from the Fire: Hearing the Voice of God in the 10 Commandments* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), p. 47.

²¹ N.T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* (dddddd), p. 129.

hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

Everyone would have known the meaning of a name in biblical days. And part of this, of course, is that parents chose names knowing what they meant. For instance, Ruth means “compassionate” (even in English we have the word “ruthless,” which means without compassion). One application of this is that some “street” level, or dynamic equivalent, translations will use the meaning of name instead of the transliteration. This, to use the book (and name) of Ruth again as an example, would mean that verse 1:16 would read something like, “But Compassionate said, “Do not urge me to leave you ...””

5.3.1 WHAT DOES “NOT TAKE IN VAIN” MEAN?

1. Don’t use in oaths or swearing. In modern times some churches would say that uttering the name “Jesus” as a curse-word when things go wrong, or to express disgust at something, is what the commandment is aimed at. It is hard to substantiate this from the text, though if view #2, below, is correct, this would certainly be entailed within this view.
2. Don’t, in general usage, take God’s name (any one of His names) lightly, or without seriousness and intentionality. This led of course to the Jewish practice of simply never saying the name “Yahweh.” Even the more general “God” is not said, which in writing ends up as “G-d” so that it is not pronounced.

There are various view on what “in vain” means, from as narrow as “oath taking” only, to any use of God’s name that is not given sober and serious consideration. The bulk of commentators take the latter view. The verb used for “take” is Hebrew *nasa’*, “to carry, lift.” True, this is used of oath-taking. But it is also used of worship, or speaking of God’s name.

Miller states, of oath-taking:

Swearing oaths by the Lord’s name was a common phenomenon in Israel. There are some forty-plus occurrences of persons swearing by the name of the Lord, customarily saying *hay-yhwh*, usually translated “As the Lord lives.”²²

Miller cites examples from Jer 5:2; 12:16;

It is very likely that a figure of speech is present here. In other words, the order to not carry God’s name without seriousness and purpose, means to give it great honor and respect. This is called *Tapeinosis*, or “suppression,” more specifically, a suppression of one thing in order to emphasize its own greatness or importance. Some examples:

Ps 51:17 “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Though this is literally true, it is far from the whole truth intended. God will do much more than simply not reject this kind of heart. He will accept and bless it.

²² Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2009), p. 69.

Ps 107:38 (God) “did not let their herds diminish.” Literally this could mean that he kept the size of the herds the same, but if tapeinosis is present here this means that God is seen as multiplying the herds.

Romans 1:16 (Paul is) “not ashamed of the gospel.”

Modern examples would include "he's no fool" (meaning he's very wise) or "its not very far from here" (meaning its close).

5.3.2 WHAT DOES “YAHWEH” MEAN?

It is clear that “Yahweh,” God’s proper name in the OT, is from the Hebrew root hayah, “to be.” However, with that as a base, there are still three interpretations of the meaning of the name:

1. The name is centered on existence. On other words, a translation would be something like, “He is” or “The God who is.” Evidence for this interpretation is from Exod 3:14, when God responds to Moses’ question about His (God’s) name by saying that He was “I AM.” This interpretation is then subdivided into two more. Either this means (1) the God who always is (from infinite past to infinite future), and perhaps also the God who is active and present (involved in our lives), or (2) the God who is, meaning in contrast to the Canaanite gods (and other gods of the ancient Near East) who are not.
2. The name is centered on causation. In Hebrew the same verbal root (hayah, “to be”) can be put in a different grammatical “tense” (better called a “mode”) to show causation. And the “a”-class vowel (the “a” in “Yahweh”) seems to show this mode (called Hiphil). In this interpretation the name “Yahweh” would mean, “He causes to be” or “He brings into existence.” The focus here would be on God as the source, both in original creation, in the past, and in the bringer of life and deliverance in the present.

5.4 FOURTH COMMANDMENT

8 Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Rooker states, “It is the only commandment specified in the creation account and the only commandment said to be a sign for Israel (Exod 31).²³ In fact several commentators state

²³ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 99.

that this commandment is the chief or pinnacle of all ten commands.

5.4.1 THE BEGINNING AND THE WORD “REMEMBER”

This command, of course, begins not with prohibition but with a positive command, i.e., the word “remember” (in the Exodus version).

Rooker states:

zakar is not primarily about recalling something from the past but refers to the presence of something in the mind. The verb does not refer to a mere recollection but includes the consequences or actions the memory demands. The verb is often used as a synonym for various actions (Josh 1:13; Esth 9:28; Ps 109:16; Isa 17:10; Amos 1:9; Mal 4:4[3:22]). The verb is often used in the sense of remembering the law and the commandments with the idea of doing them (Num 15:39-40; Mal 4:4[3:22]).²⁴

In Hebrew, remembering (the verb *zakar*), is not recalling a fact learned in one’s past. Rather it’s *meditating on, paying attention to, even doing something for* the thing or person being remembered. Here are some examples:

Gen 30:22

Then God *remembered* Rachel, and God have heed to her and opened her womb

Ps 63:5-6

5 My soul is satisfied ...

And my mouth offers praises ...

6 When I *remember* you on my bed

I meditate on you in the night watches.

Note, for instance, the results of God remembering Rachel in Genesis 30: he opens her womb.

So what does “not remembering” mean then?

Genesis 40:23

Yet the chief cupbearer did *not remember* Joseph, but forgot him.

Not remembering, or forgetting is not an entire erasing of memory, it’s not dwelling on, not focusing on, not spending any time on something or someone.

Judges 8:34

Thus the sons of Israel did *not remember* the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side.

²⁴ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 76-77.

5.4.2 THE RECIPIENTS

There are seven recipients:

you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates

This is very probably intentional, meaning everyone. Especially since the number seven is already a part of this command. This (numbering the recipients with seven) was likely done for memory purposes. It could also be done for emphasis. The number seven was often used in the Hebrew Scriptures for completeness. For instance, praising God seven times a day (Ps 119:164) means praising Him the whole day, throughout the day. So in this sense the listing could not just be for memory purposes, but to teach that everyone (even animals) needs to rest.

5.4.3 THE SABBATH AS COVENANTAL SIGN OR SYMBOL

Rooker states:

In contrast with the rest of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath law alone was considered a sign for ancient Israel (Exod 31:12-17). Just as the rainbow was a sign of the Noachian covenant (Gen 9:13,17) and circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:11), so the Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant. The same expression “between me and you” (Exod 31:13,17), occurs as a formula in the covenants established with Noah (Gen 9:12) and Abraham (Gen 17:11).²⁵

It is also interesting that in rabbinic literature the Sabbath is a symbol for the messianic age. Lincoln states:

In rabbinic Judaism, the age to come was often described as the “world which is entirely sabbath” or the “day which is entirely sabbath.”²⁶

5.4.4 SABBATH AS A UNIVERSAL COMMAND?

There are three options here:

- (1) Seventh-Day Sabbatarianism. This commandment continues, unaltered, into the church age just as it was given and meant to be obeyed and honored in the nation of Israel in the

²⁵ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), pp. 91-92.

²⁶ A.T. Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament,” pp. 197-220, in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Caron, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 199.

Old Testament and inter-testamental period. Groups that would hold to this view would be Adventists and seventh-day Baptists, as well as most Messianic Jews.

- (2) Lord's Day Sabbatarianism. The seventh day itself is not so much the key issue, but taking a "Sabbath" break, one out of seven days, is. Thus the church changed this day from Saturday to Sunday, in honor of the resurrection. So this commandment is still to be obeyed, but the exact day on which it is obeyed has changed. Most Puritans held to this view, and it is the view espoused in the Westminster Confession.
- (3) Lord's Day Observance. Many of the reformers and most of modern evangelicalism. We are not under these commandments at all any more, but we chose to worship God, and this often means refraining from intense work, on the first day of the week.

There is a fourth option that Mohler mentions:

But there is a fourth option which is really no option at all, and this is Lord's Day nonobservance. And yet, throughout contemporary evangelicalism, this fourth option creeps its way into our practice. The Lord's Day is being marginalized, no longer treated as an institution of biblical significance and eschatological promise, instead of being treated as something with which we may play.²⁷

Carson states, in defense of view #3 above:

Part of the problem in grappling with Jesus' view of the law is that although Jesus Himself lived under the old covenant, He was the messenger of the new, and actually introduced the eschatological aeon by His death, resurrection, and exultation. The Christian community, then, becomes the heir and the validation of God's promises. We have already noticed that Jesus clearly and authoritatively modified, intensified, repealed, or invested with deeper meaning, various parts of the Old Testament, but there is no undisputed example of a specific precept of the written Torah that He Himself actually contravened. Rather, Jesus' authoritative teaching anticipates the change, which does not actually come until the Resurrection. As Paul puts it Jesus was "born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). Hence, Jesus demands that the temple be hallowed (Mark 11:15-18 par.; Matt. 23:16-22); He even extends His comments to sacrificial worship (Matt. 5:23-24). Yet at the same time He predicts that the temple is doomed, on its way to collapse, and then insists that the real temple is His body. Our Lord in such fashion gathers up the law in Himself, recapitulating Israel's history and taking over its institutions in His own being (a theme especially important in Matthew and John).²⁸

Lincoln states, regarding the symbolism in Sabbath and its fulfillment in Christ:

This mission is an eschatological event through which all in principle is fulfilled and where it only remains for this to work itself out. The great year of jubilee, the intensified Sabbath year of restoration and liberation, an institution that had never

²⁷ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Words from the Fire: Hearing the Voice of God in the 10 Commandments* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), p. 91.

²⁸ D.A. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Carson, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 79.

really functioned as intended, now becomes a reality for all those who find salvation (in the fullest sense of the word) in Jesus the Messiah.²⁹

Lincoln again:

According to John, equally violent antagonism is raised by Jesus' assertion on the Sabbath, "My Father is still working, and I am working." John could scarcely express Jesus' supreme status and authority in regard to the Sabbath more strongly than in this claim to be equal with God and to be carrying out in his life-giving and judging activity the very work of God, which tolerates no interruption even by the Sabbath. The synoptic equivalent of the Johannine assertion is the saying of Jesus, "The Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28; cf. Matt 12:8; Luke 6:5). This is a momentous claim indeed when understood against the background of the Mosaic Sabbath and its terminology. In the Old Testament the Sabbath was said to be "a Sabbath to the LORD our God" (Exod. 20:10; Deut. 5:14; cf. Exod. 31:15; 35:2; Lev. 23:3). It belonged to Yahweh, the covenant Lord. Now here is Jesus as the Son of man claiming to be the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus' claim to authority over the day is not only a claim to equal authority with the law given by God in which the Sabbath law was embedded but can be understood as a claim to the same authority over the day as the covenant Lord Himself, a claim to equality with God every bit as strong as the Johannine saying itself.³⁰

How did the early church handle the Sabbath command? Bauckham states:

The early church had no single answer to the question of the relevance of the Sabbath commandment to Christians."³¹

There are a few passage in which it seems that Christians have changed from worshipping on the seventh day to the first day.

Acts 20:7-12.

²⁹ A.T. Lincoln, "Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament," pp. 197-220, in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Caron, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 201-202.

³⁰ A.T. Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," pp. 343-412, in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Caron, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 363.

³¹ R.J. Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," pp. 251-298, in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Caron, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 255.

Turner states:

We must resist any temptation to use Luke's account as though it were a paradigm of "first day" observance. Too many of the features of his account depend on the extraordinary nature of this occasion as Paul's last night with this particular church. All we can say is that around Ephesus, Christians met on what they called the "first day of the week," and that they considered it a suitable occasion on which to have their communal meal centered on the Lord's Supper, and that Luke expected such meetings to be understandable to his readership.³²

However, both 1 Cor 16:2 and Rev 1:10 do seem to be evidence for a first day, regular, gathering. The term "Lord's day" occurs only in Rev 1:10 in the New Testament. Barth states:

When the first Christians called their holy day "the day of the Lord" they were certainly not unaware that in the Old Testament "the day of Yahweh" denoted the day of all days, on which there would be concluded in joy and calamity the history not only of Israel but also of the other nations ...³³

Finally, Col 2:16 is seen, by most commentators, as an indication that the command to rest on the Sabbath is not longer considered required. Some (in the seventh-day Sabbath position) see "Sabbaths" here are referring to special feasts or festivals that took place on the Sabbath, but the more natural reading is that in the triad (in this verse), "festival, new moon [which means once a month], or Sabbath," the "Sabbath" intended is the normal, weekly one.

5.5 FIFTH COMMANDMENT

12 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

The fifth commandment is a great transition commandment. The first experience we have with God is that of our parents. And, equally, the first experience we have, as infants, with other people is, again, our parents.

Also, as mentioned above, the fourth and fifth commandments are the only positively worded ones. So again, the two in the heart of the ten commandments, the one that finishes the first five and the one that starts the last five, are worded positively.

³² M. Max B. Turner, "The Sabbath, Sunday and the Law in Luke/Acts," pp. 99-157, in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Caron, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 133.

³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, "The Doctrine of Creation" (New York: T&T Clark, 2010, originally published in German in 1945-1951), §56.

Rooker states:

An additional connotation of the word “honor” may be gleaned from Lev 19:3, where we are told that parents are to be respected (lit. yr’; “feared”). The use of the verb yr’ “fear/awe” is conceptually related to “honor.” This association emphasizes the importance of this command, as the root yr’ (fear) is commonly used to express one’s response to God (see Deut 28:58). As the relationship between Israel and God is often expressed in filial terms, the verbs “honoring” and “fearing” are used to express proper attitudes toward both God and parents (Deut 21:18-21; 27:16 with Lev 24:10-16; Num 15:30; 1 Kgs 21:12-14).

In the Old Testament the word “fear” (yr’) is essentially limited to the sacred areas of life as an embodiment of right relationship to God. The fear of the Lord has become virtually a technical expression for the Old Testament faith. . . . The author of the subsidiary Decalogue in Lev 19:3 stresses that the relationship between children and parents may be a religious act when he interprets “honor” by means of “fear.” The honoring of parents is within the realm of one’s spiritual commitment to God. The parental law in the Ten Commandments is spiritual and presupposes the spiritual dignity of parents. Parents should be viewed as representatives of God. The occurrence of the term “fear” in Lev 19:3 as a response to parents is a remarkable statement about the unparalleled relationship between parent and child. This shows that “fear” has a religious foundation; it does not convey merely a noble respect for parents since fear normally expresses one’s relationship to God. Scripture makes reverence to parents comparable to reverence to God.³⁴

It has been said that, “Beginning with the fifth commandment, a person forms his attitude toward authority in general.”³⁵

5.6 SIXTH COMMANDMENT

13 You shall not murder.

We live in a culture that is increasingly numb to this sin. “By the time the average American young person has reached the age of 18, he has witnessed over 80,000 killings, if we combine the venues of TV, movies, and video games.”³⁶

³⁴ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), pp. 106-107.

³⁵ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 117, paraphrasing Raymond F. Collins, *Christian Morality: Biblical Foundations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 55.

³⁶ R. A. Mohler, Jr., *Words From the Fire* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), p. 115.

This is a good commandment to start the latter five commandments due to (1) its link with God, and (2) this this is the foundation of inter-human relationships.

First, this is often linked to God among commentators since to murder a person is to kill God's image (someone created in the image of God). This does not apply to the capital punishment (in the Pentateuch) since this is carrying out the command of God. In other words since God owns us (he both created us and orders our lives), He has the right to take our lives. It is the taking of a life without God's authority that is sin, and again an attack upon God Himself.

The verb *ratsach* ("murder") does not occur in any other Semitic languages of the ancient Near East. It occurs 38 times in the Old Testament.

Remember that English usually has more than one word to describe an action or emotion, that is, English, like most languages, has pools or groups of synonyms, or a "word field" that an author or speaker can choose from. As an example, it has been said that English just has the one word "love," but that Greek is more precise and has several words for "love" (*agape*, *phileo*, and *eros* are the three usually cited, for unconditional love, brotherly love, and romantic or physical love respectively). But as Moises Silva has noted that English probably has even more words for love than Greek, words like affection, devotion, fondness, adore, cherish, dote on, etc.³⁷

The same can be said of the verb "kill." That is, both English and Hebrew have word fields. Hebrew has the more common root *harag*, "to kill," which seems to be very general (and thus close to English "kill") and the Hiphil form of the root *mut* (pronounced "moot"), also "to kill." The verb *ratsach* occurs far less often than these other two, is thus more specialize or nuanced.

Rooker states:

Broadly speaking, the use of the root *rsh* often carries such connotations as "strike" or "slay," with an emphasis on physical force or violence. More narrowly, the verb has a semantic range that includes "murder" or "manslaughter."³⁸

And he further notes:

The verb *rsh* is never used of killing in battle or even in self-defense or suicide. It is used on one occasion for the execution of the death penalty, but the choice of this root was intended to create a play on words (see Num 35:26-28 above).³⁹

5.7 SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

³⁷ Moises Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 93.

³⁸ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 124.

³⁹ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 127.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

Adultery is wrong in two respects. First, it violates the covenant between man and a woman, that is, it breaks the sacred connection/relationship. Second, it does this by bringing a third party into a relationship that is meant to be shared by only two parties. This therefore function as a natural illustration of the covenant that is meant to be shared by God and Israel, since again adultery shows both unfaithfulness (the absence of something) and idolatry (something active, the introduction of a new party into the relationship).

5.8 EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

15 You shall not steal.

This commandment is fairly self-explanatory. There is no debate over the verb, “to steal,” and this spears to encompass various forms and levels of theft. This is a good example of how the Ten Commandments are perhaps not the genre of law, at least in terms of enforceable, “real” laws (more on this below). But rather a genre that deals with covenant.

5.9 NINTH COMMANDMENT

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Rooker states:

The ninth commandment covers both false accusation and false testimony in court. The placement of this commandment is a means of depriving someone of what belongs to him (cf. Lev 19:11). This can happen when a person claims ownership of something in another’s possession.⁴⁰

5.10 TENTH COMMANDMENT

17 You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.

Rooker states:

⁴⁰ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 162.

Examination of comparable laws from other cultures does not appear to show any culture with a law that approaches the law of coveting.⁴¹

In Exod 20:17 the Hebrew verb *chamad* occurs twice. In the Deuteronomy version the Hebrew verb *chamad* appears once, and in the second instance is replaced by the verb *'awah*.

It is thought by scholars that the first verb, *chamad*, has to do with visual stimulation. That is, we see something with our eyes and desire it. Whereas the second verb is more internal: we desire something in our imagination or thought-life, and then want it and that of course leads to actions the more we dwell on the thought.

So this is likely another indication of the Deuteronomy version being, in part, a qualification or commentary on the Exodus version.

6. LITERARY CONTEXT AND HEBREW IMPERATIVES

When we first face the Ten Commandments, we often ask for clarification and application, with questions like “What does not stealing mean, does it mean I can’t ...?” Or “Does not coveting mean I can’t engage in the hobby of collecting ...?”

Literary context can help in this regard, meaning that it could very well be that the Ten Commandments were never intended to be “case” law, that is, something to be enforced and qualified and detailed (that was rather the role of other law sections in the Pentateuch).

6.1 LITERARY CONTEXT

After giving the outline of Exodus 19-20 in this way:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. The background | 19 |
| 2. The Ten Words | 20 |
| 3. The Judgements | 21-23 |
| 4. The ceremony of covenant ratification | 24 |
| 5. Worship—the recognition of divine kingship | 25-40 |

Gentry and Wellum state:

At the heart of the text are two sections: (1) the “Ten Words” in chapter 20 and (2) the “Judgements” (or “laws”/“ordinances”) in chapters 21-23. These are the actual headings in the text.

...

⁴¹ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 164.

Not only the headings but also the contents clearly distinguish the two sections. The Ten Words are presented as absolute commands or prohibitions, usually in the second person singular. They are general injunctions not related to a specific social situation. They could be described as prescriptive law since no fines or punishments are specified. . . . By contrast the Judgements are presented as case laws. These are presented as if they were court decisions functioning as precedents. They are normally in the format of conditional sentences. Here the fundamental principles embodied in the Ten Words are applied in particular to specific social contexts. They could be described as descriptive law since they impose fines and punishments.⁴²

6.2 THE GRAMMAR OF HEBREW IMPERATIVES

Further, the commands given in the Ten Commandments are formed, grammatically, as general rules.

Gentry and Wellum state:

As an example, “You (singular) shall not steal!” The construction *lo’* + imperfect in Hebrew is durative and nonspecific. You shall not steal today, not tomorrow, not this week, not this month, not this year—as a general rule, never!⁴³

This may be stating the case a little too strongly.

Hebrew has a grammatical form for what we might call a “positive” imperative: commands like “read!” “look!” or “kill!” Hebrew does not have a grammatical form (a change to a verb using prefix, suffix, or syllable or vocalization changes) for a “negative” imperative: commands like “don’t read!” or “don’t look!”

Instead Hebrew uses a negative particle (like our English “no/not”) with what we could call a future (or “imperfect” meaning action not perfected/completed). Hence the King James translation which even sounds like it’s a future with a negative in front of it: “Thou shalt not kill” (similarly NAS and NIV, “You shall not murder”).

The interesting point is that Hebrew has two negative particles. The much more common one is *lo’*, “no/not,” and the less common one is *’al*, “no/not.” When *lo’* is used with a future form, the sense is more universal (other words used by grammarians are “non-specific,” “durative,” “absolute,” and “permanent”). And when *’al* is used with a future form, the sense is more immediate or urgent (or “specific,” “limited”).

Here are some examples outside of the Ten Commandments:

⁴² Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2012), pp. 305-306.

⁴³ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2012), p. 306.

Using the more universal lo', "no/not":

You shall not eat from it (Gen 2:17)

Anything that does not have fins and scales, you shall not eat (Deut 14:10).

Using the more specific 'al, "no/not":

Do not let your anger burn against your servant (Gen 44:18).

Do not look back (Gen 19:17).

Do not eat bread or drink water (1 Kings 13:22)

Do not tremble and do not be dismayed (Josh 1:9).

Do not rejoice, O Israel ... for you have played the whore (Hos 9:1).

Do not do anything to him (Gen 22:12).

So whereas "do not steal" is certainly meant to be taken literally, in both literary context, and grammatical form, this is a general statement. The next two sections in this brief (8 and 9) will add to this thought, namely that the Ten Commandments are more covenantal ideals first, and laws to be obeyed second, rather than the key laws of Israel and the New Testament (for if they were foundational laws, in a legal genre, we could not explain why they are not referred to very often, in either Old or New Testaments).

7. OLD TESTAMENT USAGE

Larsen states:

Daniel I. Block observes that the Prophets and other writings in the Hebrew Scriptures beyond the Pentateuch give surprisingly little attention to the Decalogue.⁴⁴

Block himself, in the same volume, states:

By now it should be clear that apart from Deuteronomy 5 there is no evidence that the Decalogue was deemed to have exceptional authority in Israel.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Timothy Larsen, "Introduction," pp. xi-xv in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. xii.

⁴⁵ Daniel I. Block, "The Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures," pp. 1-27, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 25.

7.1 LOCATION IN TABERNACLE

Rooker states:

The placement of the tablets of the Ten Commandments inside the most holy article of the tabernacle/temple furniture, the ark of the covenant, indicates how special they were. The ark was made for the Ten Commandments. Storing the tablets inside the ark is analogous to the ancient Near Eastern custom of depositing important documents beneath statues of gods.⁴⁶

This too can be evidence, not so much of the binding nature of the Ten Commandments as legal code, but their status as evidence (and principles and parameters of) the covenant. See, in this brief, section 4.5 above.

8. NEW TESTAMENT USAGE

It is commonly claimed that all of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament with one exception, the Sabbath law. But is this true? Evans states:

The First Commandment is not quoted or paraphrased in the New Testament but there may be a few allusions to it.

...

The New Testament does not quote or paraphrase the Second Commandment. However, it seems to be alluded to or presupposed in a few passages.

...

The Third Commandment is not quoted or paraphrased in the New Testament.

...

The Fourth Commandment is not quoted or paraphrased, but it is appealed to in several passages.⁴⁷

Evans again:

It is interesting that Jesus and the authors of the New Testament writings do not quote the first three commandments. Nor is the Fourth Commandment quoted by

⁴⁶ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), p. 5.

⁴⁷ Craig A. Evans, "The Decalogue in the New Testament," pp. 29-46, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 30-32.

Jesus or a New Testament writer. (Its appearance in the Gospels is on the lips of Jesus’ critics.) The implication of this general observation is that the authority, interpretation, and application of the first three commandments were not controversial in the Jewish setting... Only the Fourth Commandment, the command to observe the Sabbath, was controversial at points. No one disputed its validity; only its application.⁴⁸

8.1 PARALLEL WITH GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In studying the feasts of Israel, it is clear that the gift of the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost, is parallel to the giving of the Ten Words on Mount Sinai. Note how the two quotes below (last row of the table), which are from Jewish websites and talk about the giving of the Law, correspond to the giving of the Holy Spirit.

SPRING FESTIVALS OF ISRAEL



TIMELINE

PICTURE

<p>Passover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one day (days begin in evening). • could be any day of the week (changes each year). • all of Passover is the “freedom from” festival. 	<p>Death of Jesus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Cor 5:7 “Christ our Passover was sacrificed.”
<p>Unleavened Bread:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lasts one week, starting with Passover. • absolutely no leaven is allowed. • the bread is always pierced with holes. 	<p>Burial of Jesus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Cor 5:7 says we are unleavened bread, just like Christ was a pure Passover sacrifice.

⁴⁸ Craig A. Evans, “The Decalogue in the New Testament,” pp. 29-46, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 38-39.

<p>First Fruits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the day after Sabbath (= Sunday) during the week of unleavened bread. • this is mainly the barley harvest (the first grain to come up). • not observed in Judaism today. 	<p>Resurrection of Jesus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Cor 15:20, 23 says Christ is the first fruits.
<p>Pentecost:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • also called the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot). • 50 days (after seven “sevens”) after Passover. • In OT, Israel is at Mt. Sinai and the law is given, thus people start living in a new understanding, or relationship, with God. • Pentecost is the “freedom for” festival. 	<p>Birth of the Church</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 2:1 • www.jewfaq.org/holidayc.htm “Passover freed us physically from bondage, but the giving of the Torah on Shavuot redeemed us spiritually from our bondage to idolatry and immorality.” • www.chabad.org : “On this day we received a gift from Above which we could not have achieved with our own limited faculties.”

8.2 THE NEW TESTAMENT CITING TEN COMMANDMENTS BUT IN NEW LIGHT

Miller states of two verses, Eph 6:4 and Col 3:21:

Furthermore, motivation clauses follow this injunction in both instances. In Colossians, the reason for parents not provoking their children, not abusing them, is “or they may lose heart.” There is a pragmatic dimension here, an appeal to self-interest. ...

In the citation of the Fifth Commandment in Ephesians 6:1-4, the fathers are not so much given a reason for not provoking their children as given an alternative. The alternative is really an explanation of how one avoids provoking the children: “Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” We are back in Proverbs, but with the further context that it is a Christlike was that is being taught.⁴⁹

Lacy states:

In Corinthians Paul has little discussion on the law—a significant fact in itself. Faced with the problems of incest and prostitution in the church (1 Cor. 5, 7) he might well be expected to point out how diametrically opposed this was to the law

⁴⁹ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2009), p. 207-208.

of God. Instead he gives a long and sometimes tortuous explanation of why such behavior is wrong for a Christian, based not at all on transgression of a code but rather on the idea of two mutually exclusive unions, one with Christ, and one with the woman in question. This suggests not only that Paul saw an inappropriateness in appealing to the law in the context of the New Covenant, but also that he saw the covenant stipulations as being of a different sort.⁵⁰

In Ephesians 5-6, there are a few reference to Ten Commandments, especially Eph 6:1, which is clearly a reference to the fifth commandment). Yet it is very interesting what Paul does here. He sets this in a context not of the law, but of the broader context of the family of God, and blood families in particular, submitting to one another, and because they are “in Christ.”

Speaking of Eph 5:21, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” Lacy states:

For children this is interpreted as meaning “obey your parents in the Lord” (6:1). Assuming that “in the Lord” (*en kurio*) is part of the original text, it is hardly to be construed with “parents” but rather with “obey.” Thus the primary reference is still within the sphere of Christian life and worship, though we need not suppose that this was seen as the exclusive sphere of operation of Paul’s injunction. But we need to remember that Paul is still expanding on his earlier command of 5:21: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”; and this is itself an expansion of the imperative of the beginning of the chapter. Here the imperative is not grounded in the commandments, but in the Christians’ “calling” (4:1); their “leaning Christ” (4:20); their new life in Christ (4:22-23, 25) and so on.⁵¹

So what Paul does in Ephesians is give multiples motivations for obeying commands, and in large part these focus on things like wisdom admonitions, identity in Christ, and life in the new community/covenant.

To use the example above, in Eph 6:1 the key to obeying parents is that “this is right,” and that the context is “in the Lord.” Verse 2, citing the fifth commandment, is not cited in the sense of “also obey this because of its one of the Ten Commandments,” but rather this is cited due to the motivation clause or promise of living long in the land.

Or to use another imperative from Ephesians, speaking the truth is mentioned specifically twice in Ephesians 4 (verses 15 and 29; many scholars also see this as the interpretation of the “belt of truth” in 6:14). However, the ninth commandment (though granted, a command that is more narrow than the general wording of “speaking truth”) is not invoked. In fact a different, verse, Zech 8:16, is cited in Eph 4:25, a passages (Zech 8) that deals with the community that the new

⁵⁰ D.R. de Lacy, “The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus,” pp. 159-195, in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Caron, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 167.

⁵¹ D.R. de Lacy, “The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus,” pp. 159-195, in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D.A. Caron, ed. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 178.

covenant and the coming of Messiah will bring about. In fact in Eph 4 there are multiples reasons given for speaking truth, but none of them are a recitation of the Ten Commandments.

9. PARALLELS WITH MARRIAGE AND COVENANT

In section 1.4 of this brief it was noted that Block states, in relation to the verses that refer to the Ten Commandments as “ten words” (and more verses that talk about them as “words”):

The Hebrew word *dabar* bears a wide range of meanings: “word,” “statement,” “message,” “object,” “event.” Especially when used with the cognate verb, *dibber*, “to speak,” the emphasis is on communication. The preference for *debarim*, “words,” in these narratives highlights the revelation of the Decalogue as a communicative, rather than a specifically legislative, event.

The phrase ‘*aseret haddebarim*, “ten words,” occurs for the first time in Exodus 34:28 and twice more in Moses’ recollection of the original events in Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4. No matter how deeply entrenched is the tradition of rendering the phrase as “the ten commandments,” here translators should follow the lead of the LXX, which translates the expression literally as *deka logous*, “ten words,” in Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 10:4, and *deka rhemata*, “ten declarations,” in Deuteronomy 4:13. The phrase is best interpreted as shorthand for “the ten principles of covenant relationship.”

This raises the question why the Decalogue should consist of ten declarations. Why not seven, the typological number of completeness, or twelve, a typological number tightly associated with Israel. Admittedly, ten also functions as a typological number in the Torah, but it seems more likely that the reason for ten is mnemonic: to facilitate memorization and recitation. If the number of principles intentionally corresponds to the finger on one’s hands, then the Decalogue was composed to function as a sort of catechism, summarizing the essence of covenant relationship.⁵²

Block again on secondary terms for Decalogue, looking at Exod 24:12:

Though singular, the second expression, *hammitswah*, “the command,” recognizes that the Decalogue does indeed consist largely of commands, but the following clause explains that these should not be interpreted like laws decreed by a king. The surrounding narrative (cf. 19:4-6), for form of the Decalogue, and the nature of the ten terms demonstrates that this document functions, not as a legal code, but as a statement of covenantal policy, as guidance for life, creating an ideal rather than decreeing law. The commands are so general as to be virtually

⁵² Daniel I. Block, “The Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures,” pp. 1-27, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 4-5.

unenforceable through the judicial system. Their intention is to create a framework and ethos within which Israelites were to live.⁵³

This idea fits well with Jesus's statement that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The Pharisees were focused on law, Jesus wants them focused on God.

Block further on the association with the term "covenant":

So tightly linked to the covenant is the Decalogue that its contents may be referred to as *dibre habberit*, "the words of the covenant" (Exod. 34:28) and even more directly *berito*, "his covenant" (Deut. 4:13), and the written document itself as *livot habberit*, the tablets of the covenant" (Deut. 9:9, 11, 15).⁵⁴

And of course the Ten Commandments are stored in the "ark of the covenant."

10. ARCHITECTURE

In the Anglican tradition, in every church, the Ten Commandments were to be set up on the east wall. The purpose was that the people could "best see and read" them.⁵⁵

Orienting a church so that the congregation faced east was carried over from Roman Catholic cathedrals (and parish churches) in Europe, which in turn draws from biblical accounts in which the Messiah comes from the east (enters Jerusalem from the east). In other words, looking to the east is an expectation of the second coming of Christ.

In the thirteen colonies of the 17th and 18th centuries, many churches kept this tradition of the congregation facing east, i.e., the whole church oriented toward the east. An example would be Christ Church in Lancaster county, Virginia, built in 1735 (and still standing). Here is a drawing facing the front of the church (facing east), that show a large representation of the Ten Commandments:

⁵³ Daniel I. Block, "The Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures," pp. 1-27, in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 5.

⁵⁴ Daniel I. Block, "The Decalogue in the Hebrew Scriptures," in *The Decalogue Through the Centuries: From The Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ This was more than just tradition, the Canons of 1604 prescribed this for churches.

The drawing is from Harper's Monthly Magazine, dated 1878. These Commandments became damaged. Thus this historic Ten Commandments the east end of the church, but they are made of walnut and date from 1934:



from Harper's New Monthly Magazine, dated 1878. These Commandments became damaged. Thus this historic Ten Commandments the east end of the church, but they are made of walnut and date from 1934:



The communion table, which has not been replaced and dates from colonial days, can be seen on both the drawing and the photo.

FIRST COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 3

Introduction

The first commandment is the foundation of all other commandments. It requires absolute loyalty to the God of gods, the Lord of lords, and serves as the entire ground upon which Israel's covenant with Yahweh is built. But it is less the demand of a slave-driver than the directive of a Father that shows his children where to find life. When asked what was the "great commandment" in the law, Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (Matt 22:37-38, from Deut 6:5), which assumes the priority of the first commandment in the Decalogue. To love the Lord and find life in him, there can be "no other gods" before him.

Context

Prior to looking at the first commandment, it is important to understand a bit about its context in the book of Exodus. One scholar writes that "in some ways the single most important point about the canonical form of the Decalogue is not what this section contains but its location. The commandments are given as an integral part of the Sinai narrative sequence, and as an essential segment of the account of Yahweh's presentation of himself to Israel within that sequence. The Decalogue has so often been taken out of this sequence, for liturgical reasons, didactic reasons, and scholarly reasons, that this point has become all too easy to miss. . . . The ten commandments must first of all be seen as Exodus presents them, words addressed by Yahweh himself to Israel gathered by his command at the perimeter of holiness about the base of Mount Sinai. They form an essential part of Israel's experience of Yahweh's Advent, and to detach

them from the narrative preceding and following them compromises our understanding of both that narrative and the commandments themselves.”⁵⁶

Thus, at this point in the Exodus narrative, Israel has been delivered by God and has fled Egypt and entered the wilderness. In 19:1, on the “third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai,” where they “encamped before the mountain” (19:2). God tells Moses to say to Israel, “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel” (19:4-6). In 19:9, he says, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” Thus, the “substance of chapter 20 comes as no surprise. The Lord had announced beforehand that he would speak to Moses in such a way that the whole people would hear (19:9), and now he proceeded to do that very thing.”⁵⁷

Discerning the timing and narrative flow of the commandments is tricky. Moses ascends and descends the mountain a few different times, and it is unclear whether God is speaking to him or all the people. Many commentators understand God to be talking directly to the people, instead of giving the commands to Moses on the mountain. For example, Douglas Stuart writes that verse 1 “specially emphasizes that God spoke the Ten Words/Ten Commandments himself directly to Israel rather than through the intermediation of Moses.”⁵⁸ John Durham also writes that “the people, duly prepared, have been brought by Moses to the place appointed for them at the bottom of Sinai, amidst the sounds and sights of Yahweh’s impending Advent. This accompaniment to Yahweh’s coming is pierced from time to time by the sound of an amplified ram’s horn, which is nearer and louder with each successive signal. Then, when the sounding of the ram’s horn has reached its most intense level, Yahweh speaks, addressing all the people assembled at the perimeter of holiness around the mountain’s base.”⁵⁹

Peter Enns summarizes the issue well:

Verse 1 poses a number of puzzles. When precisely does God speak “all these words”? The problem is that 19:25 has Moses coming back down the mountain to speak with the people. Are we to presume that Moses then goes back up, even though a return trip is not mentioned?⁶⁰ Here it may be helpful to bring 20:18 into the discussion. This verse is worded closely to 19:16 (thunder, lightning, trumpet, smoke/cloud), which suggests that both refer to the same event; that is, 20:18 resumes the action of 19:16 after the “interlude” of the Ten Commandments. This suggests that the Decalogue was given to Moses sometime before his descent in 19:25.

⁵⁶ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 278.

⁵⁷ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 211.

⁵⁸ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 445.

⁵⁹ Durham, *Exodus*, 283.

⁶⁰ In a footnote he writes that this “may be suggested by 19:24: ‘Go down and bring Aaron up with you.’”

If so, the reason for separating the Ten Commandments from their narrative context would no doubt be to give them greater emphasis, and their resumption of the mountain scene in 20:18 would alert us to this fact. This solution has certain advantages, but in the end may be inadequate, for it makes it difficult to put together the entire complex of events from the end of 19:25 through 20:25 (try and see!).

Untangling all this is a bit much, which is why this has caused so much scholarly activity. Another solution is simplest of all. Since 19:25 has Moses descending and 20:21 has him ascending, perhaps the intervening material (20:2-17) is spoken by God to Moses and all the people at the foot of the mountain. We must remember that the people are not permitted to ascend the mountain. The people's reaction in verse 19, "speak to us yourself," implies that they have just heard God speaking in verses 2-17; they ask Moses to make sure this doesn't happen again. This is a solution I am willing to live with, for the time being at least, although this, too, may prove difficult to maintain at every point throughout Exodus. As we will see, Moses' ascents and descents of Mount Sinai are a challenge to keep straight.⁶¹

Setting and Prologue (Exod 20:1-2)

Before the first commandment in verse 3 are two verses that introduce and serve as prologue to the commandments. "Any treatment of the Ten Commandments must deal with the prologue or preamble, since it clearly belongs to the words that God spoke when He proclaimed the Ten Commandments on Mount Horeb."⁶² Some traditions have even included verse 2 as one of the commandments. R. Alan Cole explains,

To Judaism, [verse 2] is the first commandment, enjoining belief in God, and, at that, not belief in God in general, but belief in the living God who had acted on behalf of Israel. To make the traditional number of ten, Judaism then groups verses 3-6 together, to make the second commandment forbid the worship of other gods, and the use of images of any kind, presumably whether of the true god or of false gods. Roman Catholic theologians also traditionally group verses 3-6 together, but make them the first commandment, instead of the second, as in classical Judaism. They then divide the tenth commandment into two, to make up the required number. But the earlier Jewish tradition, represented by Philo and Josephus, takes the view since followed by most Protestant theologians, that this opening verse is the preface or preamble, common in secular covenants of the day, and is the basis and reason for all that follows.⁶³

Another scholar writes, "At this point, we would simply say: Do not make the prologue a distinct commandment, but do pay special attention to it. Why? Because this prologue helps to shed light

⁶¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 411-12.

⁶² J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 1.

⁶³ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 151-52. For more on the numbering of the commandments, see also Ronald Youngblood, "Counting the Ten Commandments," *Bible Review* 10, no. 6 (December 1994): 30-35, 50, 52.

on the fact that in the Decalogue we possess a charter of the covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai.⁶⁴

On verses 1-2, Stuart explains that so frightening was God speaking directly to the people of Israel that

as soon as God had finished, they demanded no further direct audition of God's commands (20:19). Part of their reason may have been their sense of sin and guilt once they heard the sort of standards to which they would be held by the covenant God was making with them, but the stated and therefore main reason was simply that hearing God's voice overwhelmed them (20:18) so that they feared they would die if they had to keep enduring it ("Do not have God speak to us or we will die," 20:19). The uniform witness of the Old Testament accounts of the revelation of the Ten Words at Mount Sinai (this and 20:18-19; Deut 4:10-14, 32-40; 5:4, 22-27; 9:10; Neh 9:13) includes the same sort of emphasis, that is, that the people heard the voice of God for themselves and thus could not doubt his presence among them, a presence more directly manifest at Sinai than in any other mode previously since they had first learned of his interest in them (2:25; 4:31).

. . . The preamble and prologue to the Sinai Covenant appear [in verse 2]. The preamble, the portion of a covenant that identifies the parties to the agreement, occurs in the first clause and identifies Israel as the recipient, that is, "you," by the second-person singular pronouns (further identification being unnecessary; Israel knew very well who they were). "The LORD your God" is identified as the giver of the covenant. This, then, is a two-party covenant, linking Yahweh and his people in formal legal relationship. Israel is represented by singular pronouns, not only because "singularity" is typical in the direct address of ancient legal material but because the entire nation is viewed as an entity, a united people responding as one to God's commands.

The prologue, the part of a covenant that explains how the parties came to be related, is indicated in the second clause of the verse ("who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery"). By reason of having rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, Yahweh had a claim on his chosen people. Such a claim is sometimes called a "hesed relationship," from the Hebrew/Semitic concept of *hesed*, or "loyalty required in response to loyalty shown."⁶⁵

On the phrase "all these words" in verse 1, Cole explains that "in Hebrew, words is deliberately connected with the verb spoke with which the verse begins. The whole stress is that these commandments are words of revelation from God. The emphasis is primarily on their source, secondarily on their purpose, and only thirdly on their content, although this is naturally governed by God's nature. It has been well said that the commandments are God's nature expressed in terms of moral imperatives."⁶⁶ And on verse 2, "to Judaism, this is the first

⁶⁴ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 1.

⁶⁵ Stuart, *Exodus*, 445-47.

⁶⁶ Cole, *Exodus*, 151-52.

commandment, enjoining belief in God, and, at that, not belief in God in general, but belief in the living God who had acted on behalf of Israel.”⁶⁷

Enns also explains that “verse 2 is not a commandment itself, but is a prologue that properly sets up the frame of mind from which all the commandments, indeed all of Israel’s existence, should be viewed. It reminds Israel who God is and what he has done. It begins with another ‘I am Yahweh’ assertion (see 6:6; 7:5; also, later, 29:46). This God has brought the Israelites out of Egypt. The relationship between them has already been established. Now they are to learn what a redeemed life should look like. The law, in other words, is connected to grace. It is based on God’s gracious acts of saving his people; it is not a condition of becoming God’s people, for that has already happened in the Exodus. They now receive rules for holy living, so they can become more and more God’s holy people. This is what God wants for them In light of this, we can appreciate how inadequate it is to refer to Moses as the ‘lawgiver’ of Israel, as is commonly done. This is not wrong, but it tells only part of the story. Moses does not actually give the law, he relays it. The Lawgiver is God himself—giving the people a piece of himself, a glimpse into the divine mind and will. ‘Morality is the expression of the divine will.’ It is a major, concrete step in Israel’s journey toward getting to know their God better and better.”⁶⁸

Textual Notes

Moving now to the actual command, verse 3 reads literally, “There is not to be for you other gods before me.” There are a couple of issues in the wording worth noting. First, the phrase “before me” (’al panim) literally means, “to/before my face,” but this has been variously understood: (1) “next to me,” (2) “except me,” (3) “over me, to my disadvantage,” (4) “in front of me,” (5) “opposite me, before my face,” (6) “in defiance of me.”⁶⁹ Stuart, asking whether the idea is “before me” or “other than me,” writes that the “difference is not insignificant because the former translation might suggest that the commandment calls only for Yahweh to be Israel’s supreme God, and thus it is not a prohibition of polytheism but rather a hierarchicalizing of it, whereas the latter demands a monotheistic religion.”⁷⁰ And Walter Kaiser writes that “nowhere does this Hebrew phrase mean ‘except me.’ Such phrases do exist in Isaiah’s vocabulary But none of these were chosen for use here. The Hebrew preposition ’al has such a wide use that no one translation can be affirmed to the exclusion of the others.”⁷¹

Another commentator argues that the phrase “is quite, and importantly, ambiguous or multivalent in its meaning. A close look at the usage of that phrase elsewhere indicates several possible meanings, each of which may be found in one or another translation of this commandment.”⁷² He provides the following list:

1. “before me,” that is, “in front of me”

⁶⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁸ Enns, Exodus, 412-13.

⁶⁹ These are taken from Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 944.

⁷⁰ Stuart, Exodus, 448.

⁷¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 422.

⁷² Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 19.

2. “beside me,” that is, “alongside me”
3. “besides me,” that is, “in my place,” or “instead of me”
4. “over against me,” that is, “in hostile confrontation with me,” “against my face”⁷³

Thus, it is difficult to say with certainty how to translate it. In the end, however, the result “is the same: ‘I will not give my glory to another’ (Isa 42:8).”⁷⁴ Fretheim summarizes:

However one might translate the phrase usually rendered ‘before me,’ the command is to be absolutely loyal to Yahweh, rejecting all other gods (cf. 22:20; 23:13; 34:14). The formulation of Deut. 6:5 is a positive variant of this commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart. To use the language of Luther’s Small Catechism, it means to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. This commandment is thus the basis for all the others, which draw out what loyalty to God entails in various aspects of the relationship. In this sense the first commandment is the most important of all.⁷⁵

Along with the use of this phrase is the question of whether having no other gods before Yahweh implies that there are, in fact, other gods, of which Yahweh is the greatest and the only one to be worshiped. Or is the command saying that Yahweh is the only God/god that exists? One scholar writes,

Ancient Israel’s singular worship of YHWH, as encapsulated in the first commandment, is not yet monotheistic in the traditional Jewish and Christian sense. Here we encounter what scholars call ‘henotheism’ or ‘monolatry,’ that is, the exclusive allegiance to one deity among others without denial of the reality of other gods. . . . While the first commandment was not originally formulated as a statement of monotheistic faith, the unconditional commandment that worship be rendered to YHWH alone must surely have played a role in the subsequent unfolding of Israel’s theological reflection as it eventually left behind its henotheism for a fully developed monotheism.⁷⁶

The ESV Study Bible opts for the language of not worshiping other gods “in my presence,” meaning “worshiping other gods in addition to the Lord.” This is based on “(1) the creation account (Gen. 1:1–2:3), which makes any ‘other gods’ irrelevant (since only the Lord is active); (2) the events in Egypt, in which the Lord displayed his superiority to ‘other gods’ (cf. Ex. 12:12; 15:11; Ezek. 20:7–8); and (3) the persistent call to worship Yahweh alone (Ex. 22:20; 23:13, 24, 32–33; cf. Deut. 6:13–15). Even though this commandment does not comment on whether these ‘other gods’ might have some real existence, Moses’ statement to a later generation makes clear that only ‘the Lord is God; there is no other besides him’ (Deut. 4:35, 39; see also Ps. 86:10; Isa. 44:6, 8; 45:5, 6, 18; and 1 Cor. 8:4–6).”

Fretheim is again good here:

⁷³ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁴ Kaiser, “Exodus,” 422.

⁷⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 224.

⁷⁶ Paul E. Capetz, “The First Commandment as a Theological and Ethical Principle,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 178-79.

Sometimes it is suggested that this commandment with its reference to “other gods” exhibits a henotheism or monolatry, essentially identical words that denote belief in or worship of one God without denying the existence of others. Whether this commandment entails a theoretical monotheism—there is only one God—is an important historical question but is largely beside the point of the commandment. Its force is decisively informed by the historical fact that many Israelites did turn to the worship of other gods. Those who formulated and used the commandment saw the power of such idolatry, whether or not they recognized the reality of such gods.⁷⁷

Perhaps the issue has two perspectives. First, there is God’s perspective that there are no other gods. As the apostle Paul writes, “We know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:4-6). However, from a human perspective, we make all manner of things into “gods,” in which case we really are serving the enemy: “What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons” (1 Cor 10:20). Thus, behind the “gods” of the OT were promises of the things humans have always worshiped in place of the one, true God. As Douma writes, “Are there other gods? The answer must be yes and no. Baal, Asherah, Chemosh, Molech, Mammon, Zeus, Neptune, Woden, and Thor do not exist. But man’s yearning for prosperity, passionate love, power, and strife existed and still exist,” and under these “we may presume seductive, satanic spirits at work.”⁷⁸ So while they are not in reality God, they become gods to us. Thus, at different times Scripture seems to use language that shows both perspectives.

The First Commandment and Deuteronomy

The first commandment is also found in Deuteronomy 5. There Moses recounts the giving of the law at Sinai and says,

The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain. He said: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:4-7).

Not long after the ten commandments comes the Shema, which also has clear connections to the first commandment:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. (Deut 6:4-6)

Then, what follows the “Shema in Deuteronomy 6-11 is in effect a long sermon by Moses on the First Commandment in both its prohibitive and commanding forms. It also shows how closely

⁷⁷ Fretheim, Exodus, 224-25.

⁷⁸ Douma, Ten Commandments, 18 (with footnote).

that commandment is linked with what comes before it, the Prologue, and what comes after, the prohibition of making and worshiping images.”⁷⁹

The First Commandment and the NT

In the NT, the first commandment is simply assumed throughout. In Jewish life, there was only one God, to whom all allegiance was owed. When asked about the most important commandment, Jesus cited the Shema (Deut 6:4-5), which has a close connection to the first commandment:

The most important is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:29-30)

Below are a few other examples in the NT of the supremacy of God:

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Matt 6:24)

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor 8:6)

Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. (Gal 3:20)

One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:6)

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder! (Jas 2:19)

Thomas Oden also singles out a few examples, writing that “there are many layers of the Gospels and Epistles that assume and work off of the command to have no other gods, but three particularly stand out (1 Cor. 10; 1 Cor. 8; Matt. 28)”⁸⁰:

1. 1 Corinthians 10:14.

Shun of the Worship of Idols. Paul writes that “We provoke the Lord to jealousy” (1 Cor. 10:22) when we try to partake of the table of demons and also of the table of the Lord. Hence the beloved are urgently warned by Paul to “shun the worship of idols” (10:14). . . . Those who are tempted and fascinated by idolatry will come to expect something from nothing, and this is what turns us away from full reliance upon God’s grace. In the struggle with our idolatries, we are called to pray for grace that we may

⁷⁹ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 23.

⁸⁰ Thomas C. Oden, “No Other Gods,” in *I Am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 47-48.

not rely strictly upon our own wills to resist idolatrous temptations. Better to do what lovers do . . . voluntarily “turn our eyes away from all other loves.” . . .

2. In 1 Corinthians 8:4-7, Paul teaches that:

An Idol Has No Real Existence, but Only an Exaggerated Pretense of Being. Here Paul shows how precarious is the actual status of the gods within time and space, and how decisively they differ from the true God, who incomparably is. He points out the irony of the nonbeing of fantasized beings. In discussing food offered to idols, Paul writes that “we know that ‘an idol has no real existence’” (8:4a). . . . What are idols but things, as Scripture says, which “have eyes and see not”? “Worship is proper only to the one who is God by nature.”

There is No God but One. Paul continues: we know that “‘there is no God but one.’ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ . . .” Theodore of Mopsuestia notes further: “Paul says ‘so-called’ here because he is showing that they [these imagined gods] do not really exist,” except in our idolatrous imagination destined for judgment. . . .

Triune Reasoning. 1 Corinthians 8:6b: There is no God but one, who is Father, “and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and in whom we exist,” who ministers to us through his Holy Spirit. . . .

3. The Mystery of the True God Is Named in Baptism, Matthew 28:19.

Ambrose writes: “It is written (in Matthew’s Gospel): ‘Go baptize the nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’ ‘In the name’ [singular], he said, not ‘in the names [plural].’ . . . there is one God, not several names, because there are not two gods, not three gods.” Tritheists would have to baptize in the names of the gods, but from apostolic times Christians baptize in the name of the one God, Father, Son, and Spirit. . . .

4. What Do We Learn about the Old Testament from the New?

Through the eyes of the apostles we can now see that the one God to be worshiped as true God has met us in due course as Father, Son, and Spirit, so we can now trust him as a child trusts a caring, providing Father. God the Father has taken up the cause of sinners on the cross through the Son, and this mission is now being completed in the Holy Spirit.⁸¹

General Scholarly Comment

Terence E. Fretheim

[On the prologue in 20:1-2]: Unlike other laws, the decalogue was God’s direct address to Israel. This demonstrates the high position in which it was held by the community; there could be no

⁸¹ Ibid., 48-50.

question of its having been God-given. This introduction is of extraordinary importance (recognized in Judaism by being made the first word). On the one hand, it keeps the law personally oriented; obedience is a matter of relationship to Yahweh—not God-in-general, not adherence to law for its own sake I am the Lord your God. This is in effect a promise that Yahweh will be their God. Obedience is relationally conceived.

On the other hand, this God identifies himself in relation to a particular history. This ties the law back into the prior narrative (see 19:1). The activity of God in redeeming Israel from bondage means that the law and the service to God and world it entails is not understood to be another form of bondage. The law is a gift of a redeeming God, and a particular redemptive act is seen as undergirding and informing the law, not the other way around. Those who are given the law are already God's people. Hence the law is not understood as a means of salvation but as instruction regarding the shape such a redeemed life is to take in one's everyday affairs.

Yet these are not commands among which the people of God can pick and choose; they do lay a claim on life in very particular ways. At the same time, being grounded in redemptive reality means that the law must be viewed as open-ended . . . , continually responsive to changing situations in life. New occasions teach new duties. In fact, God's surprising and unconditional move on Israel's behalf is a standing invitation for Israel to go beyond the law. To be gracious as Yahweh has been gracious means that the people of God must always be on the lookout for ever new ways to conform their lives to that of God himself. And God's ongoing gracious activity will continue to point the way to such new vistas for life.⁸²

John I. Durham

The first of the ten commandments is basic to the nine that follow it and to the relationship the Decalogue is designed to insure. It sets forth an expectation of absolute priority, a first and fundamental requirement of those who desire to enter into the covenant relationship with Yahweh. [The Hebrew] reads, literally, "It (or There) is not to be to you (singular) other gods in my Presence." The singular verb and the singular subject and indirect object, along with the plural direct object, "gods," make the application of the command unmistakably clear. There is not to be even one other god . . . , each single member of the covenant community is specifically involved, and there is no place where this expectation is invalid, since there is no place from which Yahweh's Presence is barred (so Ps 139).

. . . The first of the commandments, in sum, is the essential foundation for the building of the covenant community. Yahweh had opened himself to a special relationship with Israel, but that relationship could develop only if Israel committed themselves to Yahweh alone. Yahweh had rescued them and freed them, delivered them and guided them, then come to them. The next step, if there was to be a next step, belonged to them. If they were to remain in his Presence, they were not to have other gods.⁸³

Peter Enns

This command follows naturally the prologue (v. 2). Because Yahweh is the Savior of Israel, Israel is to have no other gods. It is not so much the case that Israel "owes" it to God. It is more a

⁸² Fretheim, Exodus, 223-24.

⁸³ Durham, Exodus, 284-85.

matter of Yahweh's demonstrating his incomparable might and love, his faithfulness to the promises he made to his people beginning with Abraham. This is not payback for God's deliverance; rather, God is worthy.

This command also sets Israel apart from the surrounding nations in a manner that would be immediately striking to them. In distinction to every other people of the ancient world, they are to worship one and only God, Yahweh. In this way, Israel's uniqueness, her absolute "holiness" and separateness vis-à-vis the surrounding nations, is broadcast loud and clear. The appeal to have one God, of course, is to Israel alone. It is they who are to be different. Eventually this allegiance to the one true God will become the confession of the other nations. But for that to happen, the elect of God must first learn the lesson: There is no other god but Yahweh.

The phrasing of this commandment helps us see how the ancient Israelites may have understood it. It is striking to me that verse 3 does not say, "There are no other gods before me, therefore do not worship them." It simply says, "You shall have no other gods before me." Some have suggested that the first commandment is not an explicitly monotheistic statement but a command to be monolatrous. (Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God; monolatry implies the existence of more than one god, but we must worship only one.)

As foreign and "idolatrous" as this may seem to our ears, there is something to be said for interpreting verse 3 in the latter way. From a grammatical point of view, this seems to be what the text is saying. The Hebrew idiom *hayah lo* suggests language similar to forming a covenant or entering marriage. In other words, "Your allegiance, Israel, is to one God." Of course, one can argue that the nonexistence of other gods is assumed. But is it? Besides the fact that the ancient world was replete with religious systems that supported a vast array of gods and goddesses, we must remember that Israel had just spent several hundred years in Egypt, living among a polytheistic people.

. . . We should remember, too, what God did in Egypt. As we have seen, the plagues and the crossing of the sea were concrete demonstrations to the Israelites that their God defeated the gods of Egypt, declaring them impotent against his might. The conclusion is never drawn, however, that these gods do not exist. He simply says to Israel, "Look at what I did to the gods of Egypt. I beat them at their own game, on their own turf. I and I alone am worthy of worship." The first commandment gets to the heart of what it means to be God's people, not only in terms of what the Israelites have left, but also in terms of where they are going—to another polytheistic land, Canaan. When they get there, they are to remember what their God does to those, both divine and human, who oppose him.

The first commandment is a fitting way to begin. It is the basis from which the other nine derive their meaning. If the prologue provides the motivation for obeying the commandments, the first commandment provides the conceptual framework from which the others are to be understood. Yahweh alone is God, and he is speaking to the people who belong to him.⁸⁴

J. A. Motyer

⁸⁴ Enns, Exodus, 413-14.

The first commandment takes account of the fact that we Christians, as God's Israel in the present day, live in a world where there are 'many "gods" and "lords"' (1 Cor. 8:5) and requires of us undivided loyalty to the only God. . . . The reference to other gods in the first commandment is not an affirmation of the existence of other deities besides Yahweh but an acknowledgment of their allure – and their menace. Similarly, Paul, the dedicated monotheist, knew that 'there is no God but one', but he also knew that he lived in a world where the existence and worship of other 'so-called gods' abounded and that this worship exercised a potent and, in many cases, an understandable fascination (1 Cor. 8:4-5). Like every other aspect of our faith, monotheism never goes untested, and so it was for the Israel of the Old Testament. When we think of the crudity, cruelty and infant sacrifices that went with worshipping, for example, Molech, we might say, 'How could they have fallen for that?' On the other hand, Baalism, whatever else there was about it, offered the promise of material prosperity and a religion in which sexual experiences were integral to worship, and the allure was understandable. While Baal does not exist, Baalism certainly does.

. . . So the commandment says, as long as the living God lives and as long as the ever-present Lord is present, no other religious loyalty is permissible. And what a necessary word this was, for Israel would not always be an isolated people, living alone at Sinai. Once they were established in Canaan, surrounded by many other nations, how easy it would have been for them to have said that the passing of time had brought the need for fresh thinking and that new situations demanded new solutions. There would have been the temptation to adopt the customs and values of the peoples among whom they were to settle and to look for fresh 'insights' and to develop a religion compounded of what others had found 'helpful' or 'practical' and what they thought was more relevant to their new settled existence. This was not to be. While the living God lives and the ever-present Lord is present with his people, no matter what the time or where the place, there is to be only one God, one sole loyalty, the total capture of the heart.⁸⁵

Conclusion

In the Exodus account of the first commandment, we find that "our story begins with the voice of God. God is the initiator of this 'conversation.' If God had not loved enough to speak, there would be no conversation, no Israel, no nation of priests, no story called "church," no us. . . . Furthermore, everything rests upon, 'I am the LORD your God.' Command arises from relationship. Israel is owned, called, and therefore accountable. Anything that is demanded of Israel rests upon God's election and gifts to Israel, one of those gifts being the Law. . . . We were created to be God's good lovers, but everywhere we find we have been enslaved by our choices. That we are so enslaved has everything to do . . . with desiring rightly. Part of the problem is our current presumption that freedom is choice rather than desire. God created us as passionate beings. We rightly desire. The problem is when our desire becomes disordered by desiring what is desirable as if God does not exist. The result is slavery."⁸⁶ God has called Israel out of slavery, and the first commandment is given to ensure that they will not be enslaved once again.

⁸⁵ Motyer, Exodus, 217, 222-23.

⁸⁶ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 25-27.

Thus, the importance of “no other gods” cannot be overestimated: “The significance of the first commandment is not confined to those places in the Bible where it is explicitly cited; rather, its significance lies in the revolutionary potential it harbored to overturn constricting ideas of God and to challenge first Israel and then the church to discern who the true God is amid the many false gods by which cultures and societies are constantly tempted. This is as true today as it was in biblical times.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Captez, “First Commandment,” 183.

SECOND COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 4 - 6

Introduction

The second commandment forbids fashioning any kind of “carved image” for worship and also highlights God’s jealousy for his people and his demand of loyalty to him alone. The command against idolatry was critical for Israel, and it is echoed in many other places in the OT.⁸⁸ For example, “You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold” (Ex 20:23); “Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the LORD your God.” (Lev 19:4); “Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret” (Deut 27:15).

Overview—On Idolatry

Douglas Stuart explains that the significance of this may be lost on modern people. “Idolatry was not merely the practice of worshiping by means of statues and/or pictures as focal points for worship; it was rather an entire, elaborate religious system and lifestyle, all of it running counter to what God desired and desires true worship to be. The attractions of idolatry were very powerful and tended to draw even the Israelites away from true worship and covenant obedience to Yahweh in most generations. These attractions, or characteristics of idolatry, may be summarized as follows”⁸⁹:

1. Guaranteed: Ancients assumed that the presence of a god or goddess was guaranteed by the presence of an idol since the idol “partook” of the very essence of the divinity it was designed to represent. When, for example, a statue of a given god was carved and certain ritual incantations spoken over that statue to cause the essence of the god to enter it, the statue was then understood to become a functioning conduit for anything done in its presence. . . .

⁸⁸ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 48.

⁸⁹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus, New American Commentary*, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 450.

2. Selfish: Idolatry was an entire materialistic system of thinking and behavior, sometimes called the “fertility cult,” built on the idea that the gods could do virtually anything but feed themselves. The one sort of “hold” or advantage humans had over the gods was the ability to feed them. Accordingly, it was felt that if one fed a given god, that god was in turn obligated to use his power on behalf of the feeder-worshiper. . . .
3. Easy: Frequency and generosity of worship (offering sacrifices) were the sole significant requirements of faithful idolatrous religion. Idolatry minimized the importance of ethical behavior. Ritual provision of food to the gods was important; keeping a divinely revealed covenant was not. . . .
4. Convenient: Deut 12:2 requires that the Israelites “destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods.” Comparably, 1 Kgs 14:23 reports of Israelite idolaters that “they also set up for themselves high places, sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree.” These ubiquitous idol shrines allowed worshipers to take a sacrifice to the god or goddess of their choice virtually any time of day, any day of the week, and at a location nearby any place they happened to be. By contrast, Yahweh’s covenant required all Israelites to report to a single, central location three times a year, necessitating costly and time-consuming travel for many and prohibiting worship anywhere in the land but that single, approved sanctuary.
5. Normal: Idolatry was the common way of religion—without exception outside Israel—in the ancient world. This made it seem entirely normal since no one could find any parallel to the Israelite covenant obligation to worship an invisible God outside of the area of Yahweh’s special revelation to this people. Idolatry was, as well, the settled, experienced Canaanite way. . . .
6. Logical: Idolatry was polytheistic, syncretistic, and pantheistic. The ancients believed in a multiplicity of gods—every one being a specialist in some aspect of the world or nature; and therefore the ancients found it enormously attractive to think they could gain assured access to those gods through idols. It was unthinkable to most ancients that a single god could be the only God. . . .
7. Pleasing to the senses: 1 Kgs 19:18 describes the Israelite practice of worshiping the fertility-weather god Baal by, in part, bowing down to his idol and kissing it. Ezekiel 8:9ff. details some of the extensive depictions of various creatures in idolatrous form worshiped in Jerusalem. Idolatry provided worshipers with images of divinity pleasing to the eyes, spawned a whole, entrenched industry of image making (cf. Acts 19:24-27), and appealed to the sensual, even broadly speaking, to the “artistic” in the people. It was hard to appreciate the beauty or attractiveness of someone who refused to be seen, that is, Yahweh.
8. Indulgent: Although the Israelites were permitted by the covenant to eat meat whenever they chose (Deut 12:15), the usual pagan practice was to eat meat only as part of a worship sacrifice to an idol. That way, a portion of the sacrifice would go to the idol as a burnt offering, a portion to the priest representing the idol (and his family), and the remainder to

the worshiper and his family, thus never “wasting” the effect of eating meat but rather getting double value from the meat: nutrition for oneself and favor with the idol god. . . . ‘Pigging out’ thus typified pagan sacrifices, in contrast to the more clearly symbolic value of an orthodox Israelite’s worship. Heavy drinking and drunkenness also were considered proper in idol worship feasts because debauching oneself was simply part of being generous to a god.

9. Erotic: Temple prostitution is described at various points in the Old Testament. Behind it lay the notion that all creation was in fact procreation, so everything that would exist had to be born into existence. When this was coupled with the “sympathetic magic” idea that things done symbolically in one location might cause certain behaviors in another, ritual worship sex performed in order to stimulate the gods to produce fertility on earth was the result.⁹⁰

Textual Notes

Thus, the second commandment forbids any manner of idolatry. It can be broken down into two sections: (1) Verses 4-5a provide the “wording of the prohibition itself, in language purposely repetitive and inclusivistic to be sure that the person willing to keep covenant with Yahweh understands that there can be no exception of any kind to the ban on idolatry”⁹¹; (2) Verses 5b-6 are an “explanation of how seriously God takes idolatry because of its ability to corrupt successive generations, keeping them from God’s blessing and forcing him to mete out to them his wrath.”⁹²

Verses 4-5a

In verse 4, the word for “idol” or “carved image” is *pesel*, which in the verb form means to “cut, hew out.”⁹³ The other word here is *temunah*, “likeness, representation, image. The use of these two synonyms suggests “any sort of idol.”⁹⁴ Basically anything is “prohibited from being depicted—thus the somewhat elaborate and obviously comprehensive delineation of prohibited sources for copying: ‘heaven above, earth beneath, waters below.’ In other words, nothing from anywhere can be copied and used as an object of veneration.”⁹⁵ John Durham writes that such images, used throughout the Ancient Near East, were more a “means of suggesting the presence of deity” than “objects of worship.”⁹⁶ It is also important to note that this command is not forbidding visual art.⁹⁷ Israel’s tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the temple, and other sacred objects were ornately decorated. This included images, such as that of cherubim and trees (e.g., Exo 25:18-20; 1 Kgs 6:29). However, these were not objects to be venerated. “They were objects associated with Yahweh, things that surrounded his self-manifestation and gave a sense of localization to his presence, but they were not in themselves—even remotely—objects that

⁹⁰ Ibid., 450-53.

⁹¹ Ibid., 449-50.

⁹² Ibid., 449.

⁹³ See John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 285; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001), 820.

⁹⁴ Stuart, *Exodus*, 450.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 285.

⁹⁷ See Joseph Gutmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 161-74.

partook of the divine nature, as idols were thought to do for the supposed gods they represented. And the Israelites certainly neither bowed down to nor worshiped them.”⁹⁸

One question interpreters of the second commandment wrestle with is whether it is actually a separate commandment or if it is a continuation of the first. Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews, for example, take verses 3-6 together as one command. Then, for the total number to remain at ten, Roman Catholics and Lutherans divide the “do not covet” command in verse 17 into two, while Jews consider verse 2 the first commandment.⁹⁹ On the other hand, those in the Reformed stream take verses 3-4 as two separate commands. Terence Fretheim explains that “those who view verse 4 as a separate commandment tend to regard it as a prohibition of images of Yahweh, stressing the ‘for yourself’ (i.e., Israel’s worship), other divine images having been dealt with in verse 3.”¹⁰⁰ He disagrees with this, however, arguing that the “language of verse 3 and verses 4-6 is interwoven in the rest of Exodus, seen especially in the frame of the Book of the Covenant (see 20:23; 23:32-33) and in the golden calf apostasy and its aftermath (34:13-17).”¹⁰¹

Regardless of how the commandments are numbered, this last point is worth considering with reference to whether the issue of making carved images includes the worship of other gods or only refers to the proper worship of Yahweh himself. Some, like Fretheim, believe it refers to all gods, including Yahweh. Peter Enns views things similarly: “This command has a twofold thrust: Israel is not to do as other peoples do by worshiping the idols of their gods, nor are they to do as other nations do by worshiping their own God that way.”¹⁰² Durham believes the commandment is more about proper worship of Yahweh than other gods, but he still seems open to the possibility, noting how the plural “them” at the beginning of verse 5 may well refer to the “other gods” mentioned in verse 3: “To shaped images representing Yahweh (at least), Israel is not to bow down or to succumb before them to any enticement to service.”¹⁰³

Others, however, believe it refers to false worship of Yahweh, since the first commandment covers other gods. For example, J. Douma writes, “After the first commandment rejects all other gods, so that only Yahweh remains, the second commandment rejects every wrong form whereby people desire to worship Yahweh. The first commandment opposes foreign gods, the second opposes self-willed worship of Yahweh.”¹⁰⁴ Another scholar writes that the Reformed distinction between the first and second commandments “corresponds to an important distinction that runs through many strands in the OT. Worshipping gods other than YHWH, and using images in worship, are essentially two different phenomena, not merely two different aspects of the same aberration.”¹⁰⁵ And Durham also explains that “as the first commandment forbids any association with other gods to those who would be Yahweh’s, the second commandment and the

⁹⁸ Stuart, Exodus, 450.

⁹⁹ Terence E. Fretheim, Exodus, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 225.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Peter Enns, Exodus, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 415.

¹⁰³ Durham, Exodus, 286.

¹⁰⁴ J. Douma, The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 35.

¹⁰⁵ John Barton, “‘The Work of Human Hands’ (Psalm 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament,” in The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 195.

two that follow it set special dimensions of their relationship with him. The people of Israel are not to worship other gods at all. Following this most fundamental of requirements are three specifications of how Yahweh is to be worshiped. The first of these specifications is a prohibition of the use of images in the worship of Yahweh.”¹⁰⁶

Finally, Patrick Miller walks a kind of middle line, writing,

The question inherent in the commandment is Images of what? The answer to that is twofold: images of the Lord, and images or representations of other gods. The latter is where the Second Commandment overlaps with the First, and the use of the plural “gods” in several of the texts just mentioned tends to confirm that interpretation, as in “gods of silver alongside me” (Exod. 20:23). The particularity of the Second Commandment, however, marking it off from the First Commandment, is probably to be seen in its prohibition of any representation of the Lord.¹⁰⁷

He goes on to cite a passage from Deuteronomy 4 as evidence for prohibition against images of the Lord:

Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. (4:15-18)

There is probably merit in both views mentioned above. The language in other places does seem to blur the idea of carved images and “other gods” (first commandment). At the same time, it is clear the command at the very least refers to images of Yahweh, and this was an important point for Israel to learn in contrast to their past ways: this God they now serve cannot be captured in anything from the created order. He is Lord of it all, and to try to pin him down in the form of a carved image is blasphemous. It may be that the issues are not unrelated. Once we try to limit God to something we can control, we are no longer worshipping the true God and are, indeed, worshipping “other gods.”

Verses 5b-6

The reason God does not want Israel to bow and serve images is that Yahweh is a “jealous God.” The word for “jealous” refers here and “five other times in the OT to a justified jealousy of Israel’s God.”¹⁰⁸ Its adjective form is used twice, the noun twenty-four times, and the verb six times to refer to Yahweh’s jealousy, “always in contexts where the promised loyalty of Yahweh’s (= Elohim’s) people is in question.”¹⁰⁹ Walter Kaiser also explains,

¹⁰⁶ Durham, Exodus, 285.

¹⁰⁷ Miller, Ten Commandments, 48.

¹⁰⁸ Durham, Exodus, 287.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

The term “jealous” or “zealous” God must not be understood in such popular misconceptions as God is naturally suspicious, distrustful, or wrongly envious of the success of others. When used of God it denotes (1) that attribute that demands exclusive devotion (Exod 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15), (2) that attribute of anger directed against all who oppose him (Num 25:11; Deut 29:20; Ps 79:5; Ezek 5:13; 16:38, 42; 25:11; Zeph 1:18), and (3) that energy he expended on vindicating his people (2 Kings 19:31; Isa 9:7; 37:32; Joel 2:18; Zech 1:14; 8:2). Thus all idolatry, which Scripture labels elsewhere as spiritual adultery, that raises up competitors or brooks any kind of rivalry to the honor, glory, and esteem due to the Lord will excite his jealousy for the consistency of his own character and being. Every form of substitution, neglect, or contempt, both public and private, for the worship of God is rejected in this commandment.¹¹⁰

The idea of God visiting iniquity on the “third and the fourth generation” makes use of a “typical Semitic phrase denoting continuity, not to be understood in an arithmetical sense. Further, it is applied to those who ‘hate’ God, who refuse to live their lives in accordance with His will. Since this is God’s world, and since we are all involved with one another, breaches of God’s law by one generation do indeed affect those of future generations to come. Slavery, exploitation, imperialism, pollution, immorality are all examples of this principle. What we call ‘natural results’ are just an expression of God’s law in operation, punishing breaches of His will.”¹¹¹

At the same time, some still wrestle with this idea. For example, Enns writes that the “fact that children might suffer for their parents’ actions (which is what v. 5 implies; see also 34:7) is contrary to explicit statements made elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Deut. 24:16; Ezek. 18:4). The former reads, ‘Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.’”¹¹² However, J. A. Motyer addresses Enns on this point, writing that “two different contexts and two different exercises are involved. Deuteronomy is dealing with human jurisprudence, where it would be plainly unjust and illegitimate to treat a child as if he or she had done the specific deed for which a parent has been brought before the courts The commandment, however, deals with genetic inheritance, the price of being human, a fact all too evident as one generation succeeds another. But first, this ‘visitation’ (NKJV, ESV) or ‘punishment’ (NIV) is in the hands of and at the discretion of God himself and, secondly, does not constitute an unbreakable entail (Ezek. 18:4, 14-17).”¹¹³

Stuart is similar, writing that these verses have been widely misunderstood. They do not “represent an assertion that God actually punishes an innocent generation for sins of a predecessor generation, contrary to Deut 24:16 (“Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin”; cf. 2 Kgs 14:6). Rather, this oft-repeated [e.g., Exod 34:7; Num 14:18; Deut 5:9; Jer 32:18] theme speaks of God’s determination to punish successive generations for committing the same sins they learned from their parents.”¹¹⁴ At the same time, to all this is “contrasted his real wish” to show

¹¹⁰ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 423.

¹¹¹ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 156.

¹¹² Enns, *Exodus*, 415-16.

¹¹³ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 217 n. 11.

¹¹⁴ Stuart, *Exodus*, 454.

steadfast love to thousands.¹¹⁵ “In vivid contrast to this specific limitation of judgment is the unlimited response of Yahweh to those who love him, who keep their promise to set him in first place, and so keep his commands.”¹¹⁶

The Second Commandment and Deuteronomy

The second commandment is also found in Deuteronomy 5:8-10. Additionally, Miller shows how Deuteronomy 4 actually serves as an “extended biblical interpretation” of the commandment and makes a few significant points¹¹⁷:

[1.] The Lord alone determines how God shall be seen, revealed, known, and accessible. “Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you . . . out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves . . .” (4:15). Human efforts to represent God in the form of anything are a corruption because God has determined how to be accessible. Thus Israel’s modes of worship are given and not made.¹¹⁸

[2.] What is also explicit and formative in the Mosaic report of Deuteronomy 4 is the realization that the way in which God will be available and known to God’s people is through the word. “You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice” (4:12). “From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire” (4:36). It is in this speech of Moses that the revelation and accessibility of God only through the word becomes explicitly articulated in such a way that it shapes the rest of Scripture and the mode of encounter between the Lord and the Lord’s people. These verses accent the voice in the fire. God is available to the community through the word spoken by God, not by any visible form. The focus of the church on the Bible and on preaching is rooted in this claim that the word of God is how the Lord is revealed and present. . . . The line between Deuteronomy 4 and John 1 is obvious. A theology of the Word is rooted in this biblical interpretation of the Second Commandment and becomes the obvious and necessary way of interpreting the revelation and presence of God in Jesus Christ.¹¹⁹

[3.] Finally, Deuteronomy 4 opens up a critique of idolatry that becomes prominent in the prophets: the utter powerlessness of idols. In Moses’ warning to the people about becoming complacent and falling into the corruption of idolatry and thus provoking the Lord to anger, he promises that such actions will lead to their perishing from the land and being scattered among the peoples. “There,” Moses says, “you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell” (4:28). A sharp contrast is implied between the Lord, who is not reduced to representation, and the gods, which are made by human hands. The point is not so much that the Lord does these things—seeing, hearing, and so forth—though there are many such indications, as it is that made objects are completely inanimate, lifeless, powerless,

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Durham, Exodus, 287.

¹¹⁷ Miller, Ten Commandments, 51.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 52.

capable of doing nothing. Why would one worship such as that? is the implicit question.¹²⁰

The Second Commandment and the NT

While the NT does not mention the second commandment explicitly as such, there is much on idolatry:

There are teachings that continue the claims of the Old Testament that idols are mute and powerless in contrast to “the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9; cf. 1 Cor. 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 9:20) and that they are made of gold and silver and so are of economic value (Rev. 9:20; cf. Rom. 2:22). Several lists of vices to be avoided include idolatry along with other sins that are violations of the Commandments (e.g., Gal. 5:20; Col. 3:5; 1 Pet. 4:3). The closest thing to the commandment itself is probably found in the final words of 1 John: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21; cf. 1 Cor. 10:14). This follows on the assertion “He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). It is a matter of some debate as to whether the subject of this sentence is the Father or the Son, but in the light of the whole of the letter, there is no doubt that it means to claim, against the opponents of this message, that in Jesus one encounters the true God and not an idol. “Jesus is not an idol, because he is not a static, frozen image of divinity, like the image worshiper’s statue or even the iconoclast’s Torah scroll; rather, he is a living incarnate, ever-changing reality”¹²¹ On the contrary, the dangerous idols to be avoided are found among those who do not see the true God in Jesus Christ.

For Paul, idolatry plays a key role in his account of the origin of “ungodliness and wickedness” in Romans 1:18-27. There he claims that exchanging “the glory of the immortal God for images” (v. 23) is not only foolish (v. 22) but also leads to lust, impurity, and degrading passions (vv. 24-27; cf. Wis. 14:12-31). When that happened, “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (v. 25).

. . . “The notion that idolatry either leads to or includes all other sins aids in the process of generalizing and transforming it into a metaphor”¹²² That is most obvious in the places where greed is equated with idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), an echo of the interest in and coveting of the silver and gold of idols in the Old Testament as well as Jesus’ words about not being able to serve both God and mammon The ease with which idolatry is particularly associated with greed (Col. 3:5) is reflective of the close connection between avarice and the love of money and the assumption that one can place one’s ultimate trust in wealth, seeking one’s happiness and security in the acquisition of things. . . . The equation of greed and idolatry is not a dismissal of economic needs and their proper manifestations in human life. Both the political realm (kingship/Caesar, as in

¹²⁰ Ibid., 52-53.

¹²¹ Here he cites Joel Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” *Interpretation* 60 (2006): 162.

¹²² Citing *ibid.*, 155.

Mark 12:13-14) and the economic realm (money/possessions) are necessary facets of human flourishing. They are also spheres of life in which it is all too easy to turn what one needs into gods in which one places ultimate trust, making unconditional what is contingent and relative.¹²³

As background to some of Paul's comments about idolatry in the NT, Joel Marcus notes that "it was difficult for many converts to Christianity to make a clean break from idolatry. Most ancient people lived in cramped quarters and rarely ate meat; their only real opportunity to assemble with friends and enjoy ample meat and wine was at the temples' religious festivals dedicated to the gods. In refusing to participate in such feasts, Jews and Christians were opting out of their world's main social events."¹²⁴ One of the main issues with Paul in the NT is whether it is allowable to eat food sacrificed to idols. Paul allows for the individual's conscience to be the deciding factor here, but he urges love to be the main motivation no matter what (e.g., Rom 14:20-23; 1 Cor 8-10). He also connects idolatry with demon worship: "I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor 10:20-21). Thus, there is a balance for the Gentile believer as they embrace their new life of freedom in Christ.

General Scholarly Comment

Terence E. Fretheim

Why were images forbidden? Insofar as this has reference to other gods or their images (no matter how god and image were thought to be related), the issue of disloyalty to Yahweh is at the heart of the prohibition. The ubiquity of images in the surrounding religions, especially among the Canaanites, impressed the importance of this on the tradition. The drawing power of these religions was considerable, and images were part of the picture.

But why were images of Yahweh forbidden? Wherein does the idolatry lie? The usual answer is that this compromises Yahweh's transcendence. Yahweh is above and beyond everything in all creation. But it seems more likely that this prohibition arises more out of a concern to protect God's relatedness than transcendence. Texts such as Ps. 115:5-7 and Jer. 10:4-5 make this point directly (see 1 Kings 18:27-29 on the gods not being affected). Unlike plastic images, which are static and immobile, deaf and dumb, unfeeling and unthinking, and fix God at a point in time, Israel's God is one who can speak and feel and act in both nature and history (and in this sense is free). This is, of course, a problem with other gods and their images, quite apart from what their adherents or detractors might believe about them. Hence other gods (with whatever reality or nonreality they were thought to have) and images of Yahweh are exactly parallel in these respects. The worshipers of the golden calf were engaged fundamentally in a false theology, which led to false worship, believing that an image, even of Yahweh, could have accomplished their redemption from Egypt.

The link sometimes made between images and divine self-revelation is pertinent at this point. There is an intimate continuity between God an sich (God in himself) and God as revealed; God entirely corresponds to himself in revelation and activity. Images imply that not only does God

¹²³ Miller, Ten Commandments, 62.

¹²⁴ Marcus, "Idolatry," 153-54.

not think or feel or act in relationship to the world but that this is the very character of God. To worship images is to deny some basic things about God's very nature as well as the divine relationship to the world. Thus, in the aftermath of the golden calf, God in Exod. 34:6-7 interweaves statements about the divine character and the divine activity.

Hence Israel turns to verbal images, for they have the capacity to convey God's relatedness in a way that plastic images cannot. This is continuous with talk about human beings, with all of their capacities for interrelationships, having been created in the image of God. It is also consonant with the New Testament claim that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15); the one who revealed God most decisively was a living, active human being.¹²⁵

John I. Durham

The amount of attention given to the second commandment in the layered expansion following it shows that it, like commandments four and ten, was a difficult one for the people of Israel to keep. And the nature of the expansion shows that what is really at stake is not the worship of other gods by the use of idols and images connected with them, though that may often have been a result of the violation of this prohibition. The second commandment has to do with Yahweh himself and his gift of his Presence to Israel. Israelites are forbidden to make images for the worship of Yahweh because he is Yahweh, as Lev 19:4 says. Nothing created can serve to represent him, not even the realms of the mythopoeic creatures, in the heavens above and in the waters below the earth, because Yahweh has made everything and every being. He is in a way in them all, but, what is more important, he is beyond them all. . . . No image conceivable to them could serve to represent him. They must worship him as he is, not as they can envision him or would like him to be.¹²⁶

The basis for the this jealousy of Yahweh [in v. 5] is the expectation of undiluted loyalty specified by the first commandment This reference to it in the explanatory expansion of the second commandment underscores both Yahweh's demand to be worshiped as he is and also the insight that any compromise of such worship leads inevitably to a divided or even a redirected loyalty that Yahweh has every right, even every obligation, to punish. Yahweh's jealousy is a part of his holiness (Exod 34:14) and is demanded by what he is. It is justified by the fact that it comes only upon those who, having promised to have no God but him, have gone back on that promise. Those who do so show that they "hate" him, that they hold him in contempt: upon them in result must come a deserved judgment, across four generations. The language of the covenantal threat may be present in these words; but even more, the insight that indifference to commitment is contagious, in a family or in a society.¹²⁷

Peter Enns

This commandment goes into greater detail than the first, and it seems to follow it logically. But its meaning is not entirely clear. The basic prohibition is against making an idol in the form of any created thing. But does "idol" refer to an idol of one of the gods spoken of in verse 3, or does it include any sort of representation of Yahweh himself? The commandment certainly entails at least the former. Idols that the Israelites had seen were idols of other gods, a ubiquitous ancient

¹²⁵ Fretheim, Exodus, 226-27.

¹²⁶ Durham, Exodus, 286.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 287.

custom. The second commandment, therefore, is to be understood within the framework of the first. It expands the first, which is why the first two commandments have sometimes been thought of as one. The Israelites are not to worship other gods; therefore, they are not to make any idol of any kinds. They are not to represent these other gods by any earthly, created form.

But are we to conclude that this prohibition allows the Israelites to make idols of Yahweh? Absolutely not! Part of this command is also to prevent Israel from identifying the true God with any created thing. To identify God with any created thing is merely one step from thinking of God in terms of that image. It would be creating God in the image of his creation, which would put Israel's God on par with the gods of the nations. Thus, I suggest that this command has a twofold thrust: Israel is not to do as other peoples do by worshiping the idols of their gods, nor are they to do as other nations do by worshiping their own God that way.

This command is longer than the first, for it includes a threat to those who disobey and a promise to those who obey. God is jealous for his people to remain truly faithful to him. When that jealousy is roused through disobedience, it leads to punishment, but when roused through obedience, the result is blessing. This jealous God will "visit" (paqad) the sin of the fathers upon future generations. The verb paqad has heretofore been used to describe God's visitation of Israel as an act of punishment toward Egypt (3:16; 4:31; 13:19). Now, in a striking reversal, God will "visit" Israel if they disobey this command. A lot is at stake in Israel's fidelity in not making idols.¹²⁸

J. A. Motyer

The second commandment adds the requirement that this only God be thought of in spiritual, non-physical terms. It brings us to the place of worship and states that the use of visual representations of the Lord are personally offensive to him and provoke his judgmental wrath to the fourth generation. As we shall presently note, the thrust of the second commandment is that the Lord is to be worshipped without the aid or interposition of visible representations. Behind that rule, so sternly expressed and enforced, however, lies a theology, a doctrine of God, that he is spiritual and self-revealing and, when we turn to worship him, we must fill our minds and our imaginations with what he has revealed and the word he had spoken (Deut. 4:12, 15-19, 25-28). If we are to worship God as he would have it, in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24), then his word must dwell within us in all wisdom, for this is the root of true and acceptable worship (Col. 3:16).¹²⁹

With Egypt fresh in their memories, Israel was aware that 'other gods' were worshipped with the help of idols. The second commandment, however, does not refer to the worship of alternative gods – that had been dealt with in the first commandment – but to the worship of the true God in a false way, and it lays down an absolute prohibition of the use of visible representations as an adjunct to worship. God is not to be represented by any human contrivance (idol), nor identified with any aspect of the visible created orders. The commandment insists that such representations provoke the Lord to jealousy, which must mean that in his eyes they cannot but involve alternative objects of worship, giving to others what is due only to him. The first commandment, though it does not mention love, is concerned with our loving loyalty to the Lord; the second

¹²⁸ Enns, Exodus, 414-15.

¹²⁹ Motyer, Exodus, 217-18.

commandment, with its reference to his jealousy, raises the topic of his love to us, for ‘jealousy’ is part of the essence of true love, and the Lord so loves us that he cannot bear it when our desires and loyalties go elsewhere.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Ibid., 223.

THIRD COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 7

Introduction

The third commandment prohibits Israel from taking the Lord's name in vain, literally, "You shall not lift up the name of the Lord for emptiness/falsehood/vanity." There is a fair amount of ambiguity in the command, and it allows for somewhat varied application, but the main idea is that God's name is a representation of everything he is, and it must never be used in a way that detracts from this reality, such as in reckless oaths or false prophecy.

Overview—To Take the Name of God in Vain

What is the third commandment about exactly? First, it is important to understand exactly what is the "name" of God. In the OT, the God of Israel goes by a few different titles, but the most prominent is the "tetragrammaton," which is the "designation for the four (tetra) letters (grammata) in the Hebrew Bible for the name of the God of Israel, yhwh"¹³¹ (often "Yahweh" in English but in English versions translated "LORD" with small caps):

The name was God's particular revelation to Moses and the Israelites (Exod. 6:2-3). It signifies that the God of Israel, unlike pagan deities, is present with his people to deliver them, to fulfill his promises to them, and to grant them his blessings. The pronunciation of the tetragrammaton yhwh was lost when the Jews avoided its usage for fear of desecrating the holy name (cf. Exod. 20:7). In OT times the name was pronounced and was at times used in theophoric names, which can be recognized in our Bibles by the prefixes Jo- or Jeho- (cf. Jonathan and Jehoiada) and the suffix -jah (Adonijah).¹³² The pronunciation fell into disuse after the exile, when the Jews began to pay careful attention to the practice of the law. The translators of the Septuagint consistently avoided the name and substituted the title Kyrios ("Lord"). This reflects the Jewish practice of reading [Adonai, "Lord"] for yhwh The vowels of [Adonai] were placed under the tetragrammaton to remind readers that they were not to pronounce yhwh but instead were

¹³¹ W. A. Van Gemeren, "Tetragrammaton," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1177.

¹³² J. Douma also emphasizes that merely speaking the name of Yahweh was not the problem: "Nowhere in Scripture do we find any indication that the tetragrammaton—the four letters constituting the sacred name YHWH—is too sacred to take upon our lips, as orthodox Jews allege" (*The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman [Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992], 73).

to read the word as [Adonai]. Christians who were unaware of this substitution read the vowels as if they actually belonged to yhwh, which resulted in the English form “YeHoWaH” or “JeHoVaH.”

. . . Many scholars accept the widely held opinion that the tetragrammaton is a form of the root hyh (“be”) and should be pronounced as “Yahweh” (“He who brings into being”); cf. Exod. 3:12, “I will be with you” and “I AM WHO I AM,” v. 14). Regardless of the editorial decision of substituting LORD for yhwh or of using the divine name “Yahweh,” the reader must keep in mind that LORD, Yahweh, or yhwh is the name of God that he revealed to his ancient people. In reading the text of the OT, one should develop a feeling for the usage of the name itself over against such usages as “God” or “Lord” (Exod. 3:15; 6:3; Pss. 102:16, 22; 113:1; 135:1-6; 148:5, 13). The Messiah has a name, Jesus, so the God of the OT has revealed himself by a name, yhwh.¹³³

As far as taking the name “in vain,” Douglas Stuart provides a helpful overview of the issues involved, beginning with three questions that arise regarding the command: “(1) What exactly is involved in taking God’s name in vain/misusing his name? (2) Why is his name so important that protecting it is one of the ten foundational commandments to Israel? (3) What kind of punishment might ensue for breaking this commandment?”¹³⁴ He answers,

The primary meaning of “misuse the name of the LORD” [literally, “raise up Yahweh’s name for no good”] would appear to be invoking his name as guarantor of one’s words. Examples would include promising someone something “by Yahweh,” meaning: “I guarantee you that my promise is true, or Yahweh may kill me or otherwise punish me if I don’t keep my promise,” or giving legal testimony with the meaning of “I swear that my testimony in this legal matter/before this court is true with the guarantee that Yahweh may kill me or otherwise punish me if it isn’t.” In other words, the most basic, core idea behind this commandment is the prohibition of perjury. We must remember, however, that the commandment is worded generally enough to encompass any misuse of Yahweh’s name—even making light of it or overtly mocking it, to speaking about Yahweh in any way disrespectfully, to using it as the theophoric element in a personal name [i.e., having part of Yahweh’s name embedded in it] under social pressure to have one’s family “look orthodox” when in fact their beliefs were pagan/idolatrous.

Yahweh’s name signified his essence. In any culture, modern or ancient, a name is a verbal symbol for a person or thing, and the ancients in particular obviously appreciated the way names connoted the very value, character, and influence of a person or thing. To speak Yahweh’s name was to recognize his awesome power and holiness and even to invite his response to one’s particular situation at the moment. Those who had not obeyed Yahweh might well fear even to mention his name out loud lest he respond by appearing in some fashion among them. . . . Jesus reinforced and clarified this commandment with regard to making false promises (swearing falsely/uttering false oaths) that invoked God’s name by banning the practice of invoking anything as a guarantor of honesty altogether, including any substitution for the divine name in an oath (Matt 5:33-37;

¹³³ VanGemeran, “Tetragrammaton,” 1177.

¹³⁴ Douglas K. Stuart, Exodus, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 455.

23:16-22; cf. Jas 5:12), thus virtually eliminating any kind of oath-taking and requiring one's word to be one's bond in any promise.

The punishment for breaking this commandment remains unspecified and therefore could in theory take any form of God's choosing, from something relatively minor to death. Jeremiah provides examples of serious punishment when, for instance, a prophet speaks lies in Yahweh's name (a severe example of misusing Yahweh's name), including death for both the dishonest prophets and those who by believing their dishonest words also participate in the profanation of the divine name (Jer 14:14-16), banishment and death (Jer 27:15), or death at the hand of captors in exile (Jer 29:21).¹³⁵

Textual Notes

In this verse, we find that the third commandment is “structured like the second in that it contains a prohibition followed by a threat of punishment for those who do not obey. It is expressed in third-person speech relative to its reference to Yahweh—a pattern that continues throughout the rest of the commandments. The punishment does not specify particular results but indicates the far more general and ominous danger of being held guilty by God, who may choose any way he desires to protect the holiness of his name from misuse.”¹³⁶

Further, this commandment must be read “against the background of the extended meaning of ‘name’ in the OT . . . , and in particular, in the light of the importance of the extensive theology of the ‘name’ and the ‘names’ of God.”¹³⁷ A few examples are below:

An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. (Exo 20:24)

So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. (Num 6:27)

I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. (Psa 69:30)

Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. (Isa 50:10)

Many more texts could be added to this list (e.g., Exo 33:18-34:8; Deut 6:13; 10:8; 12:5, 11; 16:2, 6, 11; 2 Sam 6:18; Ps 72:19, 105:3), which, as Durham explains, “only begin to suggest the considerable extent of the rhetoric and the theology connected with Yahweh's name and the other names that are related to it. The name ‘Yahweh’ occurs some 6828 times in the OT . . . ; ‘Elohim’ occurs 2600 times ‘Yahweh’ is used exclusively in reference to Israel's God in the OT and most of the occurrences of ‘Elohim’ refer to Israel's God. When the variety of other

¹³⁵ Ibid., 455-56.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 454-55.

¹³⁷ John I. Durham, Exodus, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 287.

names, titles, and epithets and the usages of [shem] ‘name’ in reference to Yahweh/Elohim are added to the occurrences of Yahweh and Elohim, an impressive total suggests how important the use of the divine names in the confession and worship of ancient Israel actually was, and how necessary therefore was some instruction regarding their use, in particular the use of ‘Yahweh.’”¹³⁸

The verb “to take up” is “here an ellipsis for ‘to take upon the lips,’ that is, ‘to utter’ the divine name.”¹³⁹ One scholar writes that the “expression ‘lift up the name’ is not common, occurring in only two other places (Exod. 28:12, 29; Ps. 16:4b). The uses in Exodus 28 are not relevant, but the usage in Psalm 16:4b, ‘I will not lift up their names on my lips’ (my trans.), provides a close parallel to the commandment and confirms that in this context the phrase means to name something, to pronounce or say the name.”¹⁴⁰ Herbert Huffmon provides another possibility, stating that “lift up” refers to lifting up one’s hand and speaking the name of God, as in an oath:

With reference to the specific biblical evidence, the initial phrase of the commandment, literally “You must not lift up the name of the LORD your God frivolously/false,” is likely elliptical for the more expanded form: “You must not lift up (your hand and speak) the name of the LORD your God falsely/frivolously.” “Lifting up the hand(s)” is a well-established phrase referring to the gesture of swearing (Ezek 20:6, 15, 23, 28, 42; etc.). Note especially Deut 32:40: “I lift up my hand to heaven, and I say: By my eternal life. . . .” A parallel phrase for the gesture of swearing is “raising the hand(s),” which occurs in Gen 14:22, where Abram says, “I raise my hand to the LORD . . .” and then swears an oath; and in Dan 12:7, “He raised his right hand and his left to heaven and swore by the life of the Eternal.”¹⁴¹

The phrase often translated “in vain” is the Hebrew *lashaw’* and “suggests ‘nothingness, insubstantial thing,’ even ‘lie.’”¹⁴² As far as what it means to take the name “in vain,” the text seems to allow for some margin on this. Huffmon explains that this is a characteristic of good laws: “An important feature of any fundamental or constitutional code is ambiguity. Explicitness is not a virtue; ambiguity that allows for clarification and adjustment to changing circumstances, while providing a basic direction of development, is a necessary quality of a fundamental code.”¹⁴³ Thus, in attempts to interpret the third commandment, Durham explains that *lashaw’* has been assigned a “wide and somewhat ambiguous range of meaning . . . , and has also been taken quite specifically” (e.g., false swearing).¹⁴⁴ Sarna also writes that the “ambiguities [of *lashaw’*] allow for the proscription of perjury by the principals in a lawsuit, swearing falsely, and the unnecessary or frivolous use of the divine Name.”¹⁴⁵

Another scholar suggests that a “deeper reason for the prohibition may be seen in the fact that God is the one living reality to Israel. That is why His name is involved in oaths, usually in the

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus, JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 111.

¹⁴⁰ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 68.

¹⁴¹ Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Fundamental Code Illustrated: The Third Commandment,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 207-08.

¹⁴² Durham, *Exodus*, 287-88.

¹⁴³ Huffmon, “Third Commandment,” 206

¹⁴⁴ Durham, *Exodus*, 288.

¹⁴⁵ Sarna, *Exodus*, 111.

formula ‘as surely as YHWH lives’ (2 Sa. 2:27). To use such a phrase, and then to fail to perform the oath, is to call into question the reality of God’s very existence.”¹⁴⁶ And Durham writes that “in general terms, this commandment prohibits a lack of seriousness about Yahweh’s Presence in Israel, demonstrated through a pointless, misleading, or even false use of his name.”¹⁴⁷ At the same time, “notice that this commandment does not exclude legitimate oaths, for they appear frequently (e.g., Deut 6:13; Ps 63:11; Isa 45:23; Jer 4:2; 12:16; Rom 1:9; 9:1; 1 Cor 15:31; Phil 1:8; Rev 10:5-6).”¹⁴⁸

The second half of the verse explains that the Lord will “not hold him guiltless” who breaks this command. The wording “connotes ‘letting someone get away without punishment.’”¹⁴⁹ Stuart explains that the “punishment for breaking this commandment remains unspecified and therefore could in theory take any form of God’s choosing, from something relatively minor to death.”¹⁵⁰

The Third Commandment and Deuteronomy

The third commandment is found in identical form in Deuteronomy 5:11. Additionally, Patrick Miller shows that Deuteronomy 6:13 also informs our understanding of the command:

It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.

There are two ways this verse contributes: (1) “the command ‘and by his name you shall swear’ indicates that one major sphere in which the name of God comes to play—and thus an important activity in which speaking God’s name can be improper and wrong—is in speaking oaths in which the name of God is uttered to ground the oath”; (2) “The particular form of the Third Commandment, with its positive mode and its emphasis on ‘by his name (alone),’ suggests immediately that the negative counterpart of swearing ‘by his name’ is swearing by the name of someone else, of some other god, some other power. So if this text points to swearing oaths as an activity being covered by the Third Commandment, it also indicates that it has to do with the exclusive worship of the Lord alone.”¹⁵¹

The Third Commandment and the NT

In the NT, we find the same kind of reverence for the name of God as is found in the OT. A few texts that have connections to the third commandment are below:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.” But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or

¹⁴⁶ R. Alan Cole, Exodus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 157.

¹⁴⁷ Durham, Exodus, 288.

¹⁴⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 423. Sarna also notes that “several biblical passages favor the use of God’s name in oath-taking when done in sincerity and truthfulness” (Exodus, 111).

¹⁴⁹ Stuart, Exodus, 457.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 456.

¹⁵¹ Miller, Ten Commandments, 66.

by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil. (Matt 5:33-37)

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt 7:21-23)

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.” You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, “If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.” You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. (Matt 23:16-22)

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. (Acts 19:13-16)

I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. (1 Thess 5:27)

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. (Jas 5:12)

Beyond oath-taking and not using the Lord’s name falsely is the fact that in Jesus God has revealed his name most perfectly:

In the New Testament, we find confirmation and an expansion of what we have found in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ “glorified” His Father and revealed His name to those whom God gave Him out of the world (John 17:4, 6). What kabod [“glory”] represents in the Old Testament, doxa represents in the New: the weight, the greatness, and the honor due to the name of God. This honor Christ displayed toward His Father.

But, at the same time, Christ did much more. As the Father’s Son, He revealed the name of the Father in such a way that He could say, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In Christ, the Father Himself stands before us. For that reason, we cannot

speaking adequately about the name of the Lord—thus, about the third commandment—without taking into consideration the name of Jesus Christ. Christ and the Father are one (John 10:30, 38). No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Included in the name of the Lord is the fact that He will be active as the Savior of His people. Well then, that salvation has been and is bestowed through Jesus Christ. Our salvation lies in no one else, for among men on earth there is but one name given whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). To Him has been given the name above every name (Phil. 2:9-11). For that reason, “glory” and honor are due to Him as well (John 1:14; 5:23; 16:5; 1 Cor. 2:8; Rev. 5:12-14).

But in addition to “glorifying” the Name, the New Testament deals also with blaspheming that Name. The beast from the sea who wages war against the saints, and the multitude in league with him, blaspheme the name of God (Rev. 13:5-9). This is an assault upon God’s power and majesty. Such conduct characterizes also those who refuse to be converted, in spite of the plagues God sends upon them (Rev. 16:9, 11). But believers also can, by means of their attitude and conduct, bring discredit upon the name of God. A wicked lifestyle on the part of Christians can be the occasion for outsiders to blaspheme the word of God (Titus 2:5).¹⁵²

On the name of Jesus, Miller also writes that “both the church’s Trinitarian theology and the words of Scripture themselves bring the name of Jesus into the trajectory of meaning and action flowing out of the Third Commandment The conviction that the God whose name is revered is known in three persons has at least two effects. One is to bring the name of Jesus into the same care and consideration that the name of God is given in the Commandments. The other is to provide the community with a name for God that it uses as much as it seeks to avoid misuse of the name. Focus on the name of Jesus belongs to the very beginning of the story and is there at the end. So the Gospel narratives not only give attention to the name of the child born to Mary; they also ascribe to him names that create an immediate identification with the name of God in the Old Testament . . . , and at the end the name is the expression of divine sovereignty over all the world:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9-11)

The name of Jesus, however, is not simply a fact reported biographically. It also comes to represent the reality of God as fully as does the name YHWH in the Old Testament.”¹⁵³

General Scholarly Comment

¹⁵² Douma, Ten Commandments, 79-80.

¹⁵³ Miller, Ten Commandments, 111-12.

Terence E. Fretheim

This prohibition is basically concerned with the divine reputation. That is, it is designed to protect the divine name from being used in any way that brings God or God's purposes for the world into disrepute. It assumes the close relationship between name and renown (Ps. 135:13; see 30:4; 97:12). God's good name is as important to God as any human being's name is to the person who bears it. A name is a precious thing; the way in which people talk about others—such as gossip or other vain and hurtful talk—will affect their standing in the community (in many ways the eighth commandment does for people what this one does for God).

A central concern of God in Exodus to this point has been “that my name may be declared throughout all the earth” (9:16). That name is most fully defined in Exodus in the proclamation of the name in 34:6-7. A central issue at stake for God is the declaration of this name to the world and the effect the hearing of that name will have on people. Will they be drawn to it or repelled by it or remain indifferent to it? If that name has been besmirched in some way by the manner in which it has been used by the people of God or by the practices with which it has been associated, then the divine intentions may fall short of their realization. Or, if in the very declaration of the name itself it is used in misleading or false ways (e.g., false prophecy; see Deut. 18:20), God will not treat this hindrance to the divine intentions lightly.

Discussions of this commandment have all too often limited its applicability. It has been especially associated with the use of the name in magic or divination, or false swearing (Lev. 19:12; cf. Ps. 24:4; Matt. 5:34-37) or profanity (cf. Lev. 24:16). This may be the case, but more is at stake. The name of God is so commonly associated with empty phrases or easy religion or the latest ideology of a social or political sort. The name thereby gets dragged down to the level of the contexts in which it is used. As people hear it so used, they may come to associate the name of God fundamentally with a cause they wish to avoid or reject. Consequently, they will not be drawn to this God and the name will not receive its due honor and respect. At the deepest level, use of God's name is a matter of mission.

Positively, God's name is to be used in prayer and praise, one important dimension of which is witness. Many psalms do so: “I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving” (Ps. 69:30; 34:3) God's name is to be declared even more widely: “For this I will extol you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing praises to your name” (Ps. 18:49; 96:2-3). . . . “As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 48:10; 86:9). God's mission for the world is linked to the use of the divine name.¹⁵⁴

Peter Enns

What's in a name? Plenty. The name of God, the tetragrammaton YHWH, is God's name. It is the name whose significance was patiently explained to Moses in chapters 3-4. It is the name whose very mention connected the Exodus community to the patriarchs. It is God's salvation name (3:15; 6:6; 15:3), and as such must be treated with highest respect. Even today, many Jews make no attempt to use or even pronounce the name, referring to God simply as Hashem (Heb. for “the name”). And since it is God's name, it is an indication of the intimacy between God and his people. Other nations may refer to him as God or the God of Israel, but not as Yahweh. This

¹⁵⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 227-29.

is the name by which Israel, the saved people of God, his treasured possession, his holy people, know him. This is why his name is to be treated with utmost respect.

But what specifically is prohibited in the third commandment? Opinions vary. It may mean to use the name flippantly, pointlessly—the Hebrew root [saw’], translated “misuse” in the NIV. This root is used again in 23:1, where it seems to mean “false” (as in a false report spread about someone). If we may transport that meaning to here (which is by no means automatically legitimate), it may suggest that the third commandment prohibits saying something false about God, something untrue that compromises his honor.

Others suggest that this commandment refers not to saying something false about God, but using the name in a harmful way towards others, that is, using God’s name to curse others. In the end, this is a command that contains a fair amount of ambiguity. Durham’s comments come as close as any to stating the general principle behind the commandment.

The third commandment is directed not toward Yahweh’s protection, but toward Israel’s. Yahweh’s name . . . must be honored, blessed, praised, celebrated, invoked, pronounced, and so shared. To treat Yahweh’s name with disrespect is to treat his gift lightly, to undermine his power, to scorn his Presence, and to misrepresent to the family of humankind his very nature as “The One Who Always Is.”¹⁵⁵

The Jewish practice throughout history of not at all pronouncing YHWH is no doubt a safeguard against any possibility of breaking this commandment. Its ambiguity perpetuates zealous adherence.¹⁵⁶

J. A. Motyer

The third commandment arises from the self-declaration of God, I am the LORD [Yahweh], with which this whole great statement begins (2). The Lord’s name is shorthand for all that he has revealed about himself with, of course, particular reference to the central revelations made through Moses and confirmed in the events of the exodus. ‘I AM WHO [WHAT] I AM’ (Exod. 3:13-15) is like an ample container into which the great truths revealed by Moses and through the exodus have been packed: the Holy One, the God of the covenant, the Redeemer, Deliverer, Judge, the caring God of daily providence, the God of reconciliation who brings his people to himself. Any particular misuse of the divine name would deny or scorn any one of these great fundamentals. But since each is an aspect of what God is, any misuse of his name is a personal insult to him.

Misuse the name of the LORD (traditionally ‘take the name in vain’) is (lit.) ‘lift up the name . . . to emptiness [saw’]’. The most obvious meaning of ‘lifting up the name’ is that ‘lift up’ is an abbreviation of ‘lift upon one’s lips’. The use of the noun ‘God’ or the name of Jesus or the title ‘Christ’ as an expletive would certainly fall within this condemnation and, on a more serious level, so would the giving of one’s loyalty to, or taking one’s oath by, a false god – though this . . . would be an extension of the primary meaning.

¹⁵⁵ Here he cites Durham, Exodus, 288 and notes that the “capitalized phrase with which Durham ends this quotation is his rendering of ‘I AM WHO I AM’ in Ex. 3:14” (Peter Enns, Exodus, NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 417 n. 17).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 417.

The third commandment is one of four commandments (the second, third, fourth and fifth) with some added comment. There is no ground for the common assumption among specialists that these comments were later additions and that all of the Ten Commandments were originally composed of no more than the succinct words with which they open. Indeed, it is of no small interest to note that these are the commandments most lightly flouted today – and why should we not assume that, in the unchanging realities of human nature, they were just as easy to belittle and just as much in need of reinforcement when they were first promulgated? At any rate, the third commandment is given the support of a most striking sanction, all the more frightening in being left vague: the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless. The implication is that the Lord's name is intensely precious to him. It is he who notes its misuse and who matches the punishment to the crime in each and every case.¹⁵⁷

John I. Durham

This commandment is couched in language deliberately chosen to permit a wide range of application, covering every dimension of the misuse of Yahweh's name. Yahweh had not withheld his name but had freely given it to Moses and so to Israel as both a summary and an extension of the revelation of his Presence. His sovereignty is such that he was not subject to the manipulation of his worshipers, and thus he opened himself to his people with as much fullness as they could stand. Not surprisingly, there are no incantation texts in the OT. Yahweh could not be controlled, or even altered in his set purpose, by men.

The third commandment is directed not toward Yahweh's protection, but toward Israel's. Yahweh's name, specifically the tetragrammaton but in principle all Yahweh's names and titles, must be honored, blessed, praised, celebrated, invoked, pronounced, and so shared. To treat Yahweh's name with disrespect is to treat his gift lightly, to underestimate his power, to scorn his Presence, and to misrepresent to the family of humankind his very nature as "The One Who Always Is." So serious was such an abuse, and apparently also so widespread, that the third commandment was expanded at some point in its history by a warning. Any member of the covenant community who dishonors Yahweh's name, and so Yahweh's Presence, will not be left unpunished by Yahweh. What this punishment is to be is not specified. That it will be is stated as a solemn certainty.¹⁵⁸

Conclusion

One point to mention before concluding is that the common notion that the third commandment refers to modern profanity ("cussing") is too simplistic. Already in 1952, one scholar wrote that "to almost everyone this particular injunction has become associated with profanity and the loose speaking of the Divine Name. But a careful study of the Hebrew may not necessarily bear out this particularized interpretation."¹⁵⁹ Douma explains that "modern profanity is still only an echo of biblical cursing. People mention God, but without really thinking about Him. In the Bible, cursing had religious significance, but today cursing is so secularized that people use the word

¹⁵⁷ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus, Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 224-25.

¹⁵⁸ Durham, *Exodus*, 288.

¹⁵⁹ Albert J. Wagner, "An Interpretation of Exodus 20:7," *Interpretation* 6 (1952): 228.

god without intending to say anything about God. For most people who do this, God is dead—someone at whom nobody hurls insults anymore.”¹⁶⁰ Modern profanity is “not usually intended to be blasphemous. People use the name of God and of Jesus Christ as an interjection or an exclamation in circumstances of shock, surprise, and anger. People use these names to add force to their words.”¹⁶¹ Thus, it is not exactly what is being condemned in the third commandment. At the same time, even if “modern swearing is not a self-conscious demonstration of unbelief, it is nonetheless very clearly a symptom of unbelief. People who have turned their backs on God naturally take up His name idly.”¹⁶² So, in the end, it is still not something to be applauded nor is it entirely excusable.

In summary, then, to know “God’s name, to have received this great gift from God, requires that we rightly use the name. . . . Because we had to be told God’s name, we cannot make God mean anything we want. God must reveal who ‘I AM’ is through loving actions toward Israel and by the resurrection of Christ. Revelation is the way we name our discovery that God has discovered us. God has chosen to come close to us, to be intimate, to reveal the ‘name that is above every name’ (Philippians 2:9) in order that we might joyfully witness to the whole world that we have not been left to our own devices. We joyfully witness that we have been given the means whereby we can get to God because God, in revealing God’s name, has gotten to us. We are to fashion lives that demonstrate the power of knowing how to address God by God’s proper name.”¹⁶³

FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 8 - 11

¹⁶⁰ Douma, Ten Commandments, 82. For what the third commandment is condemning, he lists such things as abusing God’s name with a show of power and misusing oaths. Miller also adds taking the name of God lightly and false prophecy (Ten Commandments, 103-08).

¹⁶¹ Douma, Ten Commandments, 81.

¹⁶² Ibid., 82.

¹⁶³ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 42.

Introduction

In the fourth commandment, God calls Israel to keep the Sabbath. The word for Sabbath is connected to the idea of “stopping.” Israel is to stop regular life one day each week and do no regular work. This provision includes the entire household, even animals. God set the pattern in creation, stopping on the seventh day, and he, in turn, gives the pattern to Israel by which they are to order their lives in a beautiful rhythm of work and rest.

Overview

Signs for covenants were common in the ancient world—that is, something “visible that would remind people of the covenant, lest they forget it. The Sabbath functions as such a sign for the Mosaic or Sinai covenant, as 31:13, 17 will specify. It provides a regular weekly reminder for everyone: as people keep the Sabbath, stopping their work and devoting themselves to worship, they demonstrate openly that they are keeping the covenant.”¹⁶⁴ At the same time, the Sabbath itself is “wholly an Israelite innovation. There is nothing analogous to it in the entire ancient Near Eastern world. This is surprising since seven-day units of time are well known throughout the region. Yet the Sabbath is the sole exception to the otherwise universal practice of basing all the major units of time—months and seasons, as well as years—on the phases of the moon and solar cycle. The Sabbath, in other words, is completely dissociated from the movement of celestial bodies. This singularity, together with Creation as the basis for the institution, expresses the quintessential idea of Israel’s monotheism: God is entirely outside of and sovereign over nature.”¹⁶⁵

There are many ways in the OT that the “Sabbath Commandment is lifted up, and we are invited to think deeply about its meaning and implications.”¹⁶⁶ For example,

- Of all the commandments, the Sabbath requirement is the one with the most variation in the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of the Decalogue. Rather than being a problem, however, the variations serve to create a rich theological and ethical directive for the community of faith.
- The Sabbath Commandment is the only one that explicitly includes both negative and positive aspects—prohibition and command—confirming that both dimensions belong to our understanding of God’s requirements.
- The Sabbath Commandment, more than any other, draws together both the particularity and the universality of the commandments: that is, the Sabbath is a custom or practice belonging to a particular religious community, but it also provides for a fundamental human need: rest from our work.
- The Sabbath is the one commandment whose focus is on the good of the addressee rather than the worship of God or the good of the neighbor, though in fact all three dimensions are clearly present in the commandment.

¹⁶⁴ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 457.

¹⁶⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 111.

¹⁶⁶ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 117.

- The Sabbath Commandment is the center of the Deuteronomic form of the Decalogue . . . and influential in its teaching even though the Sabbath itself is never mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy outside the Decalogue.
- The Sabbath Commandment is the one commandment that is anticipated, actually given as a commandment and incumbent upon the people, before the Lord’s address at Sinai (Exod. 16).
- The Sabbath is prominent and pervasive in the biblical text generally; it is more often referred to than any other commandment qua commandment except possibly the First and Second Commandments.¹⁶⁷

Textual Notes

The Sabbath commandment is longer than any of the others and can be broken down into three parts: (1) the command proper (v. 8); (2) explanation of how to keep the command (vv. 9-10); (3) reason for the command (v. 11).

Verse 8

This verse is comprised of the actual command itself and is the “first to be framed in a positive form, although still brief and apodeictic. Verse 12 contains the only other positive command in this series, but elsewhere in the law this form is not uncommon (a closely related form of positive command is the type found in Gn. 9:6). This alternation between positive and negative commands is not unknown in ancient codes, but if we want to find a negative form of the command for the sake of consistency, it is in verse 10, ‘You shall not do any work’.”¹⁶⁸

The command to “remember” means that “Sabbath law antedates Sinai.”¹⁶⁹ The Hebrew verb is *zakar*, meaning “‘remember,’ as always in contexts of covenantal obligation, in the sense of ‘observe without lapse’ or ‘hold as a present and continuing priority.’”¹⁷⁰ Enns explains that remembering is not “merely a cognitive exercise, any more than remembering your wedding anniversary means simply recalling it. As any forgetful husband can well attest, some concrete demonstration of remembrance is expected. Biblical remembrance requires action. In Exodus, we have seen this already in 2:24 and 6:5, where God remembers Israel in their slavery. There, too, remembering means more than just recalling that the Israelites are slaves. It means delivering them from Egypt. Likewise, by remembering the Sabbath, the Israelites are no doubt required to act in a certain way, a notion supported not only by the alternate phrasing of Deuteronomy 5:12 (‘observe’), but by the explicit instructions that follow in Exodus 20:9-10.”¹⁷¹ Several commentators note that the NIV’s translation “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” is inadequate. The reason is that there is a lamed preposition before the verb “make holy” and the word “by” is, in Motyer’s words, “not the most obvious translation.”¹⁷² It is less likely that the idea is that “keeping it holy” is the means to remembering and more likely that the preposition indicates purpose or result: “remember the Sabbath so that you keep it holy.” In other

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 117-18.

¹⁶⁸ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 157.

¹⁶⁹ Motyer, *Exodus*, 233.

¹⁷⁰ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 289.

¹⁷¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 418.

¹⁷² Motyer, *Exodus*, 226 n. 27. So also Stuart, *Exodus*, 458; Enns, *Exodus*, 418.

words, the remembering—and the action (or non-action) this involves—is what actually keeps the Sabbath holy: “‘keeping holy’ should better be understood as the resulting effect of remembering.”¹⁷³ Motyer translates it “remember . . . so as to make holy” with the idea that this “presupposes a thoughtful view of the Sabbath, preparing beforehand and excluding any activity or exercise that fails to promote the stated purpose.”¹⁷⁴

On the word “Sabbath” (shabbath) itself, scholars have given significant attention.¹⁷⁵ Durham explains that this is especially true as it “regards its etymology and its possible cultic and calendrical associations” but that this work “has produced no firm conclusions,” though “there is a wide agreement that the institution of the sabbath is an ancient one in Israel, and that the noun [shabbath] belongs to the semantic field of [the Hebrew word for] ‘rest, cease.’”¹⁷⁶ Stuart also writes that “‘Sabbath’ is the English reflex of a common Hebrew word [shabbath] meaning ‘stopping/stoppage/cessation.’ The Sabbath is the ‘stopping [day]’, the day on which one’s regular work ceases both for the sake of giving laborers a break from their daily routine and for the sake of providing a focus on God that is periodically (weekly) heightened.”¹⁷⁷

Additionally, the word “does not mean ‘rest’ as has often wrongly been conjectured. . . . This does not mean, however, that the purpose of the Sabbath cessation did not include rest for laborers human and animal; it simply means that the point of the law is a cessation at the end of the work week that must be observed whether or not someone thinks he or his animal is tired enough to need it. The motivation should be that the worker must stop working because God’s law says to stop working and to attend to worship, not because the worker thinks that he or his servant or his animal ‘needs’ or ‘has earned’ rest and relaxation.”¹⁷⁸

Verses 9-10

These verses make clear that no labor is to be done on the Sabbath, but they fail to give any precise definition of what this means. Sarna explains that “elsewhere in the Bible certain types of work are specified: ‘leaving one’s place,’ that is, walking beyond certain limits, agricultural activities, kindling fire, gathering wood, conducting business, carrying burdens, treading the winepress, and loading asses.”¹⁷⁹ Stuart also addresses this and summarizes the issues in these verses well:

What this explanation portion of the word/commandment prohibits is not any sort of exertion, or the preparing of food, or the feeding or watering of animals, or anything else necessary to get through the day in an agrarian culture. Rather, it prohibits duplicating on the Sabbath any of the usual labors of the other six days that can possibly be stopped without actually causing someone or something harm. People and animals would still need to be fed; lactating animals would still need to be milked; priests would still work within the sanctuary. But to the extent possible, all workers were to receive a day of rest.

¹⁷³ Enns, Exodus, 418.

¹⁷⁴ Motyer, Exodus, 226 n. 27.

¹⁷⁵ For a scholarly survey, see Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Tradition-Historical Investigation*, SBL Dissertation Series 7 (Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), 94-121.

¹⁷⁶ Durham, Exodus, 289. Sarna also adds that “whatever the true etymology of the Hebrew term may be, the institution itself has no connection with any known Mesopotamian observance” (Exodus, 112).

¹⁷⁷ Stuart, Exodus, 458.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 458 n. 48.

¹⁷⁹ Sarna, Exodus, 112.

How the Israelites might choose to distribute various sorts of minimal chores, such as feeding animals and preparing food, is not specified. Such necessities would have to take place at any rate, and those who truly tried to keep the covenant law would easily discover the fairest ways to make everyone's workload minimal on the day of rest and to provide compensatory rest for those who labored on the Sabbath out of necessity. The goal was no laboring at all; some unavoidable work would nevertheless have to be done by those who served food to people or took care of flocks and herds.¹⁸⁰

The commandment specifically prohibits any Sabbath day shifting of laboring away from native Israelites to foreign workers ("nor the alien within your gates")¹⁸¹ or from free Israelites to hired workers or servants ("nor your manservant or maidservant") or from adults to children ("nor your son or daughter"). Envisioned instead is an egalitarian work stoppage that benefits everyone and leaves everyone free and ready for worship and spiritual emphases.¹⁸²

Verse 11

In verse 11, the "sabbath command is tied to the act of creation. Indeed v. 11 provides an etiology [i.e., cause] for the sanctification of the sabbath, which was rooted in the creation tradition. The etiology grounds the sanctity of the sabbath in the creative act of God; it is built into the very structure of the universe."¹⁸³ Similarly, Durham writes that here "still further justification of this requirement, beyond the assertion that the sabbath day belongs to Yahweh, is added. Yahweh himself respects this day as a day of surcease from the labor of the other six days: his work of creation was accomplished in six days, and then he rested. . . . Yahweh himself kept the sabbath, and blessed it: Israel therefore could hardly do otherwise."¹⁸⁴

The Fourth Commandment in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy has the word "observe" instead of "remember"¹⁸⁵ in the command and uses the exodus from Egypt as the ground instead of God's rest on the seventh day of creation, though, as R. Alan Cole observes, "these explanations are not mutually exclusive, since both deal with 'rest,'" whether from slavery or from the work of creation.¹⁸⁶ The passage reads,

¹⁸⁰ In a footnote he writes that the "impossibility of actually doing nothing at all on the Sabbath was always obvious" (Stuart, Exodus, 459 n. 52).

¹⁸¹ On rest for the "sojourner" mentioned in verse 10, H. R. Cole argues that while it has been claimed that these were circumcised "righteous aliens," an "exegesis of the place of the alien in Exod 23:12 and Deut 5:14 provides strong evidence that these texts do include the uncircumcised alien in their perspective, and that his rest and refreshment is just as much apart of the purpose of the Sabbath as the rest and refreshment of the Israelite householder" ("The Sabbath and the Alien," Andrews University Seminary Studies 38 [2000]: 228).

¹⁸² Stuart, Exodus, 459.

¹⁸³ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 416.

¹⁸⁴ Durham, Exodus, 290.

¹⁸⁵ The difference between these is likely insignificant (ibid., 289; for more, see Andreasen, Sabbath, 83).

¹⁸⁶ Cole, Exodus, 158.

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deut 5:12-15)

Thus, it makes “still another (and no doubt still needed) attempt” to compel the Israelites to obey the Sabbath.¹⁸⁷ Durham continues, “Adding ‘as Yahweh your God commanded you’ (Deut 5:12) to what is the end of Exod 20:8, they give as a reason not Yahweh’s rest after his work of creation, but the exodus from the slavery of Egypt (Deut 5:15, which begins with [‘remember’], the verb of Exod 20:8). Keeping the sabbath, for them, is a testimony of Israel’s election and deliverance: in Egypt there was no day of interruption of the unending round of forced labor; Moses’ requests for time to worship were met by Pharaoh with scorn; but Yahweh ‘brought them out from there’ and so commands them to celebrate the sabbath day as a ‘stopping day’ proclaiming not only their dependence upon Yahweh but also their independence of all other peoples and powers.”¹⁸⁸

Miller explains that the “Sabbath is given preeminence in Deuteronomy. If the Prologue and the first two commandments form a kind of principal or great commandment, a second principal commandment is offered in the Sabbath Commandment. Or to put it another way, if the Prologue and the first two commandments, positively formed in the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5), are the most important word of the Lord, the second most important word is the Sabbath command. The two principal commandments—sole worship of the Lord as God and sanctifying the seventh day—not surprisingly point us to the two chief features of the book of Deuteronomy: its radical claim for the exclusive worship of the Lord and its humanitarian sensibilities. . . . Along with the prophets, the command to keep the Sabbath is the primary biblical impetus for social justice in the human community.”¹⁸⁹

The Sabbatical Principle

Beyond the command itself, we see throughout the OT a general sabbatical principle. Some examples of this include the release of a Hebrew slave in the seventh year (Exo 21:2-11), the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-12), and the sabbatical year (Exo 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7; Deut 15):

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave

¹⁸⁷ Durham, Exodus, 290.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Miller, Ten Commandments, 129.

the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. (Exo 23:10-11)

Miller explains that the issues related to sabbatical are three: (1) “the service of God is routinized in the common life,” (2) “all human work is relativized,” (3) “the sabbatical principle is God’s provision of freedom and rest as a continuing possibility for human existence.”¹⁹⁰

The Fourth Commandment and the NT

When we look at the NT, we see that “Sabbath observance is presumed for the Jewish community, including Jesus and his disciples as well as Paul and his companions Not only are there several references to going to the synagogue on the Sabbath (e.g., Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 13:10; Acts 13:14), but in one of the more important of these, Luke 4:16-30, the text also speaks of Jesus going to the synagogue on the Sabbath day ‘as was his custom’ (v. 16 . . .). There are also indications of care about what one does or does not do on the Sabbath, such as limitations on travel (Matt. 24:20; Acts 1:12), making sure that Jesus’ body is in the tomb before the Sabbath (Mark 15:42; John 19:31), and the women going to the tomb to tend to the body only after the day of rest is over (Matt. 28:1//Mark 16:1-2; John 20:1). The Luakn account makes this point overtly [“On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment” (23:56)]. . . . Various texts refer to teaching or praying on the Sabbath (e.g., Jesus in Mark 1:21//Luke 4:31; Mark 6:2; Luke 6:6; 13:10; and Paul in Acts 13:14-16; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). Sabbath keeping, therefore is a presumption of the Gospels. It is also a matter of controversy there, however. The issue is not whether one obeys the commandment or not. That is a given. The point of contention is how one obeys. What constitutes proper Sabbath keeping?”¹⁹¹

Stuart also writes that in the NT “Jesus clarified this commandment by emphasizing its purpose, which is to give a break from work to human beings, not to restrict people from doing what is enjoyable (e.g., Matt 12:1-12 and par.; Luke 13:10-16; John 7:22-23). Paul helped New Covenant believers relate to the Sabbath by calling attention to its purpose of granting rest to workers, with the understanding that such a rest could come on virtually any day as long as it was not denied (Rom 14:5; cf. Col 2:16).”¹⁹²

There is also the issue of the relationship of the Sabbath to the “Lord’s Day.” Miller writes that “through the Commandments and Jesus’ teaching and actions, the church has the Sabbath as God’s gift of a time of rest and a holy day. Yet there is some tension between that reality and the church’s observation of such a time and such a day not on the seventh day of the week, as is regularly the case in both the Old Testament and the New, but on the first day of the week. The move from seventh day to first day is deeply rooted in historical events and practices.”¹⁹³ J. Douma explains that while “there is no specific verse in the New Testament clarifying for us the transition from Sabbath to Sunday,” on the basis of “New Testament teaching, we can say that from the very beginning, Sunday was held in honor among believers. It was the day of Christ’s

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 131-34.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 158.

¹⁹² Stuart, Exodus, 459 n. 52.

¹⁹³ Miller, Ten Commandments, 162-63.

resurrection, and for that reason was self-consciously called ‘the Lord’s Day’ (Rev. 1:10). From the earliest period, Christian writers followed this form of expression.”¹⁹⁴ And while early Christian writings tended to distinguish Sunday from the Jewish Sabbath, the early church still “received Sunday as a day of joy, exactly like the original intention of the Sabbath. Later the church realized that this joyful commemoration required freedom from daily work, entirely in line with the fourth commandment.”¹⁹⁵

Another scholar writes,

While the Lord’s Day is not the Sabbath, there is an ontological relationship between the two. The Sabbath is regarded just as highly as the major festivals in the Jewish liturgical year: Passover, First Fruits, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement, Rosh Hashanah, and Tabernacles. Many of these bear anagogical relationship to Christian festivals, most obviously the Day of Atonement to Good Friday, Passover to Easter, Tabernacles to the Transfiguration. And immediately before Jesus’ announcement of his Lordship even over the Sabbath, he issues his invitation to all who labor and are in need of rest: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me . . . you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30). Jesus is not only the Lord of the Sabbath, but the only one under whose yoke we learn of true Sabbath rest. In celebrating his presence with us in the Eucharist on Sunday, the Lord’s Day, we participate proleptically in the eternal Sabbath.¹⁹⁶

Thus, the Sabbath in the NT also points forward. For example, the author of Hebrews writes, “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his” (Heb 4:9-10). Miller explains, “Celebration of the day of Jesus’ resurrection as the Lord’s Day inevitably and appropriately opened up an eschatological dimension to the Sabbath, something already present in the Old Testament. . . . The Scriptures thus understand the Sabbath rest as both present gift and also blessing yet to come. That Sabbath promise receives its seal and authentication in the church’s celebration of the holy day of rest and worship on the first day of the week, thus forever identifying the Lord’s Day with the climactic redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ, a work that is the ground of all hope.”¹⁹⁷

The Sabbath for Today

How are we to understand the fourth commandment today? One scholar writes that “most of us learn in Sunday School that while Christians are freed in Christ from the responsibility to practice the ceremonial laws of the OT, we are still bound to honor the Ten Commandments. . . . Are Christians bound to observe the Sabbath day? If so, how? Should we follow the Seventh-Day sabbatarians, observing as do Orthodox Jews the Sabbath on Saturday? Or is Sunday the

¹⁹⁴ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 138-39.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁹⁶ Kathryn Greene-McCreight, “Restless Until We Rest in God: The Fourth Commandment as Test Case in Christian ‘Plain Sense’ Interpretation,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 234.

¹⁹⁷ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 165-66.

Christian Sabbath? . . . Do we abstain from work? Should we spend the whole day in worship? Is it legitimate to spend one hour in worship and the rest of the day in leisure, outings, sports, or whatever we please? Or has the fourth commandment been dissolved, canceled, abrogated? Or has it been fulfilled? How do Christians read the fourth commandment? The fact is that, descriptively speaking, Christians have read the fourth commandment in all of these ways at varying times and places.”¹⁹⁸ There seems to be legitimacy both to the idea of the Sabbath being fulfilled in Christ and the idea that there is still a place for Christ-followers to observe the Sabbath in some sense.

While a detailed treatment of the Sabbath for today is beyond our scope, Douma also makes a valid point worth including.¹⁹⁹ He argues against a complete spiritualizing of the Sabbath, explaining that a spiritualizing approach is not “satisfied with the ‘external’ feature of the Sabbath and moves quickly from the one day of ‘ordinary’ rest to the seven days of rest from all our ‘evil’ works. The ordinary rest that we may enjoy in order to catch our breath is of secondary or even tertiary importance (as with Calvin). Only when we tie it in with going to church do we then speak of our weakness as the reason for having one day per week.”²⁰⁰ He continues,

Now, there is no objection to seeking a broader meaning in the fourth commandment. We do that with the other commandments, too, imitating Christ’s own instruction in the Sermon on the Mount. . . . But our point is this: when we understand the external rest on the Sabbath merely as a depiction of inner rest, then we fail to grasp the full meaning of the fourth commandment. That “ordinary” physical rest, whereby we catch our breath and make room for praising God, is in itself already a spiritual enjoyment. The spiritual essence does not lie somewhere beyond our physical rest, but within it. Resting from your daily work, and generously allowing your employees to rest as you do, is already putting to death your own will and allowing God to work in you. This kind of Sabbath is a delight and not simply an external depiction of delight.²⁰¹

General Scholarly Comment

Douglas Stuart

This word/commandment is the longest of the ten (five words longer in the Hb. than the second commandment when both the commandments and the explanation-warnings accompanying them are considered together). That does not mean that it is more important but only that it apparently was regarded as so basic and thus requiring sufficient clarification that it could not and would not be misunderstood and therefore misapplied or partially ignored. Throughout the expression of this commandment, a balance between “stopping” and “keeping holy” is struck: clearly the purpose of the Sabbath cannot be limited either to a break from work one day a week or to the setting aside of one day a week for special attention to godliness. Rather, both are to be done on every Sabbath.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Greene-McCreight, “Restless,” 223-24.

¹⁹⁹ On the subject of the Sabbath for Christians, see also Robert G. Rayburn, “Should Christians Observe the Sabbath?” *Presbyterion* 10 (1984): 72-86.

²⁰⁰ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 124.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁰² Stuart, *Exodus*, 457.

The change the Sabbath brings about in one's weekly routine makes it a refreshing day rather than the absence of activity therein. Indeed, one whose weekly work was essentially sedentary (a "desk job") might be more active physically on the Sabbath than at any other time and still completely fulfill its obligations regarding the cessation of "labor." This does not mean that any activity on the Sabbath, as long as it would not be one's regular "work" activity, would be "holy." But if one were physically active in pursuit of service to God and/or godly service to others, it would be entirely consistent with the Sabbath law to work hard at such sorts of activities and be reasonably worn out by them at the end of the day. To love God is not to have a lazy day one day a week; rather it is to focus on doing his will specially on one day a week—to worship, learn, study, care, and strengthen the spirit.²⁰³

Walter Kaiser

The command to remember the Sabbath is moral insofar as it requires of a person a due portion of his or her time dedicated to the worship and service of God, but it is ceremonial in that it prescribes the seventh day. The Christian church is required to observe the morality of time by setting aside one day in seven to the LORD, but it has chosen to change that ceremonialization of that day from the seventh to the first (cf. the early church's use of "the Lord's Day," i.e., a day belonging to the Lord [Rev. 1:10] or "On the first day of every week" [1 Cor 16:2]). The sanctity of the first day in honor of God's new deliverance, which the Lord Jesus accomplished in his death and finally in his resurrection, was already signaled in the symbolism of the feasts in Leviticus 23—"the day after the Sabbath" (v. 15); "on the first day hold a sacred assembly" (v. 7); "the first day is a sacred assembly . . . on the eighth" (vv. 35-36). Indeed, these were the very feasts that pointed forward to the very same events that Christians now celebrate on Sunday!

The reason for memorializing this day rested on two works of God: one retrospective (v. 11 links it with the Creation), which pointed to the new Rest of God in the end times; the other prospective in the plan of redemptive history (Deut 5:15 links it with the Exodus from Egypt), which pointed to a new Exodus in the final day. This interpretation is borne out by the fact that the Sabbath was another "sign" of the covenant As Childs points out (Exodus, p. 417)²⁰⁴, in neither case did Israel's memory of either the Creation or the Exodus act as the motivation for observing the Sabbath. Rather, it was the reverse; Israel observed the Sabbath to remember God's work of Creation and the Exodus.²⁰⁵

Terence E. Fretheim

To keep the Sabbath day holy is to keep it separate from the other six days as "a sanctuary of time" (Patrick). People are not to live as if all time were their own, to do with as they please. The God of all time retains the right to determine how one day shall or shall not be used. This weekly separation (emphasized by the inclusion in vv. 8 and 11) is to be publicly demonstrated by a time of rest for all engaged in work, including the servants and the animals. "Remembering" is more than a mental act, it is an active observance (see God's remembering in 2:24). There is no

²⁰³ Ibid., 460.

²⁰⁴ Here he refers to Childs, Exodus, 417 (see n. 20 above).

²⁰⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 424.

mention of it as a time for worship, but the fact that it is a “Sabbath to the LORD” leaves room for worship as a way of developing that commitment.

It is probable that the sabbath is an ancient institution (the ancient Near Eastern connections are uncertain), but its understanding and use developed considerably over the years. This is reflected in the various rationales given in 20:10-11; 31:12-17; Deut. 5:13-15. Such developments expanded in post-biblical times, even into the modern era, with the sabbath subject to detailed legislation (e.g., blue laws). In the face of this, every discussion of the sabbath should be decisively informed by the fact that this day is a divine gift to the world, not a burden. “The sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

The rationale given is God’s resting on the seventh day of creation (Gen. 2:2), thereby hallowing it. Keeping sabbath is therefore a matter within the sphere of creation rather than redemption or specifically Israelite law (see its pre-Sinai use in 16:22-30). It is not simply something for Israel to keep; even animals and strangers are to honor it. Yet the divine rest is more than a humanitarian gesture or a paradigm for creaturely resting—because God did so, the creatures should. It is a religious act with cosmic implications.

The divine rest in creation is not a picturesque way of speaking of the end of God’s creating; rather, the divine rest “finished” the creation. God’s resting is a divine act that builds into the very created order of things a working/resting rhythm. Only when that rhythm is honored by all is the creation what God intended it to be. The sabbath is thus a divinely given means for all creatures to be in tune with the created order of things. Even more, sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping. To keep the sabbath is to participate in God’s intention for the rhythm of creation. Not keeping the sabbath is a violation of the created order; it returns one aspect of that order to chaos. What the creatures do with the sabbath has cosmic effects. Such lines of thought may help explain the death penalty which Israel attaches to sabbath-keeping (31:12-17; 35:2); the order of creation is at stake.

It may seem incoherent to suggest that not doing work helps keep chaotic forces at bay. Yet one needs only to participate for a moment in the rat race which is the modern world to realize how the neglect of the sabbath contributes to the spread of chaos. This points to something fundamental about the relationship between human endeavor and cosmic order. There is a place for human dominion within the created order (Gen. 1:28). But sabbath-keeping puts all human striving aside, recognizes the decisive role of God in creation, and provides for a weekly oasis to rest back in the arms of this reality.

The humanitarian concerns associated with the sabbath deserve special mention; they are picked up again in 23:12 and 34:21, and especially in Deut. 5:14-15 (which roots the sabbath in God’s exodus deliverance). The sabbath is a fundamentally egalitarian institution. The sabbath rest is for all, rich and poor, master and servant, human beings and animals. One must certainly do more than keep the sabbath to address these divisions (see 22:21-27). Yet the sabbath brings this matter to the regular attention of the community. Thereby one moment in creation is recaptured when the world’s creatures were at peace with one another. And it calls for, indeed anticipates, a new world order when once again it will be so and everything will be very good. This

humanitarian concern of the sabbath is a bridge to the commandments concerned with interhuman relationships.²⁰⁶

John I. Durham

The fourth commandment is the longest in the Decalogue, because it is the most expanded of all the commandments. No other commandment has received as much reapplication and as many defining and justifying clauses as this one. The probable reason for its expansion is the difficulty the people of Israel had keeping it, a difficulty attested by the attack of Amos (8:4-8) on the greedy merchants fidgeting for the sabbath to pass.²⁰⁷

Quite apart from the set days of religious festivity or solemn assembly, none of which is referred to in the Decalogue, the sabbath day is to be thought of as extraordinary in the week instead of in the year. It is to be remembered without exception, set apart from all other days as a day for holy purposes, and kept free of the customary labor of sustenance of the other six days, precisely because it belongs to Yahweh. The six days allotted for the “business as usual” . . . of life must be made to suffice. On the sabbath day, nobody is to undertake such “usual work.” The singular pronoun “you” is supplemented by a list of six potential sources of labor, taking in the family, the employees, the work-animals and even the visitor stopping temporarily with the Israelite.²⁰⁸

Peter Enns

This and the fifth commandment are the only two positive commands among the ten. This one is given in three parts: the command itself (v. 8), specification of what it means to keep the commandment (vv. 9-10), and the reason for the commandment (v. 11). The apparent emphasis placed on this commandment, suggested by its length, is in harmony with the foreshadowing of this commandment in 16:26 as well as the reiteration of the importance of the Sabbath in 31:12-17 and 35:1-3 Clearly, the issue of the Sabbath is of special concern for the writer.

. . . But how should this remembering and hallowing of the day be done? This is answered in verses 9-10. Work six days, but on the seventh no one in the Israelite community—not even servants, animals, or aliens—is to work. But what is work? This question, unfortunately, the commandment does not answer. We do not know whether the ancient Israelites understood it completely either.

The history of Judaism has gone to great lengths to specify precisely what requirements are involved here. Jeremiah 17:22, 24 seem to add some specificity (no loads are to be brought through the city gates on the Sabbath), but this can hardly be understood as other than a specific application of this commandment. Likewise, in Exodus 16:26 the rules about gathering manna do not help us in answering the question of what types of things are and are not covered. In 23:10-11 the law of the Sabbath day is applied to the “Sabbath year” (leave the land unplowed in the seventh year), but this does not help us understand the manner in which the Sabbath day should be observed. In 23:12 the Sabbath command is simply repeated with no further elaboration. The question for how the Israelites were to keep the Sabbath has baffled interpreters for centuries and will not be answered here.

²⁰⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 229-30.

²⁰⁷ Durham, *Exodus*, 288.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 289.

Verse 10 hints at a possible humanitarian motive for the Sabbath—to allow servants and others to rest—although the commandment as given in Deuteronomy 5:14-15 makes this motive much more explicit and central. But even if a similar motive is suggested in Exodus 20:10, the explicit motive given in verse 11 is dominant. The pattern of six days of work followed by one day of rest is to be maintained by the Israelites because this is the pattern of creation. Their “work week” is a reflection of the original work week. Whatever else we might glean from this pattern, one thing is striking especially in light of the author’s use of the creation theme throughout Exodus: Israel’s day-to-day life is a re-creation. God saved Israel to be a new creation community whereby all things would become new.

This is a reconnection with the Garden of Eden as Israel sits poised to enter the land of Canaan, the new garden. As God ordered the universe in Genesis 1, he is now giving Israel order in its existence amid the chaos of the world around them. By resting on the seventh day, Israel is not just following God’s command, but actually following God’s lead. They are doing what he himself did first. This pattern, therefore, is not a burden but a delight and high honor. By ceasing his own work on the seventh day, God declared it to be different, separate—or, as the commandment puts it, “holy.” The Israelites, too, are to “keep it holy” (v. 8) by remembering it.²⁰⁹

J. A. Motyer

The Sabbath commandment focuses on the one day in seven that was to be a day of rest – that is to say, free of unnecessary work and of the gainful employment that rightly occupied the previous six days. But we have already seen (Exod. 16) that the Sabbath cast its blessed shadow before it in that if it was to be a day of holy rest, it required thoughtful preparation and pre-planning. Because of this, we can summarize by saying that the Sabbath commandment is concerned with how life as a whole is to be ordered under God.²¹⁰

Our responsibility to live our lives in imitation of God is the heart of the fourth commandment, for did not the Creator perform his perfect work of creation – the work which he pronounced ‘good’ (Gen. 1:31) – by working six days and resting one day? What is then the perfect life pattern for humans in the image of God? Is it not to work for six days and rest for one? This has nothing to do with Christians attempting (as they are so often accused of doing) to impose their standards on others who do not share their convictions. Far from it. When a doctor prescribes a certain course of treatment, the sick person does not round on him by asking what right he has to impose his doctor’s convictions on someone who is not a doctor. In such a case the doctor would reply, ‘Don’t be so foolish! I’m not imposing my standards on you. I’m telling you what to do because you’re human, because you’re a person and this is the way human beings “work”.’ In exactly the same way, the Creator prescribes his pattern of working and resting for us because we are made in his image and this is our proper functioning procedure. It is ours because it was his. Our calling is to live out his pattern, to make his example the way we order our lives, to reflect what we are – beings created in the image of God.

²⁰⁹ Enns, Exodus, 418-19.

²¹⁰ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus, Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 218.

Exodus concentrates on the Sabbath as a day free from work, with obvious reference to the gainful employment of the previous six days, the wage-earning days which provided an economic basis for family life. The loss of one day's financial gain cut deeply into the commercially ambitious, as Amos 8:4-6 shows. The businessman in the Amos passage happens to be unscrupulous, but many an honest shopkeeper, or self-employed farmer, must have faced the fact that losing a day's income out of obedience to the commandment was costly. In this way, faith and obedience join hands in the assumption that the Lord will look after those who put him first, and the fourth commandment is pre-eminently a call for the obedience of faith. Incidents like those recorded in Numbers 15:32-36 and Exodus 16:23 show, both negatively and positively, that the freedom to be enjoyed on the Sabbath imposed a duty of careful forethought.

The cessation of work is not, however, an end in itself but, so to speak, 'clears a space'; as Childs puts it, there was to be 'the cessation of normal activity . . . in order to set aside the Sabbath for something special'. What that 'something special' was is left vague by the commandment, but three principles are clear. The Sabbath was to be a day of holiness, that is, a different day, a day set apart from all other days (8), a day belonging in some special way to the Lord and therefore to be lived uniquely for him (10) and a day essential to our imitation of him (11). The vagueness is doubtless deliberate, leaving room for individual choice and personal preference, but the one thing that is common to all three principles is that it was to be a different day. And that surely remains true today: Sunday should be not a second Saturday every week (as the term 'continental Sunday' is found to mean), nor an idle nothing (as 'Sunday observance' has so often turned out to be), but a day positively different because it is being lived specially for God.²¹¹

Conclusion

The importance of the Sabbath for Israel (and the world) cannot be overstated. "The Sabbath is the major way in which Israel is identified as Israel. To 'remember' the Sabbath is more than to recall an idea in our heads. It is also to bend our lives to the contour of the command Sabbath is the goal of Creation. This means that keeping Sabbath is a matter for the whole world, not just Israel, so even animals and strangers are to enjoy it. Furthermore, Sabbath is tied to Creation in that, in resting, God signaled the goodness of divine creativity in the world, the finished quality of the world. When God paused to call creation 'good' (Genesis 1:10, 31), God was enjoying his sovereignty. . . . Built right into the core of our lives is this gracious rhythm of work and rest, activity and reflection. So to keep Sabbath is to be in step with the way God intends the world to work, it is to participate in an act of 're-creation' in which we are put back in touch with the way in which God intends for life to be enjoyed. Sabbath is not the joy of not doing work, rather Sabbath is perfect work, the end of work, the end of it all."²¹²

²¹¹ Ibid., 225-26.

²¹² Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 56-57.

FIFTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 12

Introduction

The fifth commandment charges Israel to honor their father and mother. As Israel's structure was founded upon the household and its place within the land of Israel, familial stability was critical to the life of the nation. Further, inherent in the command is the idea that honor, care, and gratitude are due to those who, like God, have loved and nurtured their children.

The Final Six Commandments

The fifth commandment stands at the gateway to the final six commandments. As Peter Enns explains, “The first four commandments concern our conduct toward God; the remaining six concern our conduct toward others.”²¹³ And John Durham writes, “With the fifth commandment, the second basic direction of the commandments as the fundamental principles of life in covenant with Yahweh is taken. The first four commandments set forth the principles guiding Israel’s relationship to Yahweh; the last six commandments set forth the principles guiding Israel’s relationship with the covenant community, and more broadly, with the human family.”²¹⁴

At the same time, “we should not force too sharp a distinction between these two foci, as if the first four are ‘religious’ and the last six ‘social’ or ‘ethical.’ The laws concerning conduct toward others are still commands from God. They are still his laws, so that breaking any commandment, even one against a fellow Israelite, is an offense toward God. That is, there is no sphere in ancient Israelite life that is ‘secular.’”²¹⁵ Enns continues with regard to the final six commands:

A twofold division of the law may be suggested by the fact that there were two tablets (cf. 34:1), but such a common view is not problem-free. For one thing, the fourth commandment already contains both “social” and “religious” dimensions, so the hard and fast division is not so clear-cut. Moreover, we are nowhere told what exactly was written on the two tablets. The popular assumption is that the first four commandments were written on the first tablet and the last six on the second, but this is nowhere stated or even implied in the Old Testament. Some have suggested that all ten were on each of the two (i.e., Moses received two copies). This suggestion is based on an analogy with Hittite legal treaties, where two copies of a treaty were made, one for each party. Douma considers this option too speculative, particularly since both tablets were deposited in the ark (Deut. 10:1-5).²¹⁶ It seems best to leave this matter open.

One thing that is striking about the latter six commandments is their relative brevity, a point that leads to a number of interpretive challenges, especially an ambiguity about precisely how they are to be obeyed. This is not a factor exclusive to these six. We have seen already that the third and fourth commandments are not very explicit either. But the ambiguity of these six commandments is exacerbated precisely because they are so brief.²¹⁷

²¹³ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 419. In this regard, Patrick Miller explores how the fifth commandment serves as a bridge between the “first table” and “second table” of the commandments (*The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 168-74).

²¹⁴ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 290.

²¹⁵ Enns, *Exodus*, 419.

²¹⁶ Here he cites J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 11; see there for more on whether the Ten Commandments can be thought of in terms of “two tables.” On the subject, Walter J. Harrelson writes that “such an effort to divide the commandments into contents suitable for two different tables is probably without justification, however. It may well be that originally the reference to the two tables was understood to mean the production of two identical exemplars of the one set of commandments” (“No Contempt for Family,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004], 238).

²¹⁷ Enns, *Exodus*, 419-20.

Durham summarizes, “As the second, third, and fourth commandments are in many ways extensions of the first commandment, the first four commandments are the foundation for the final six commandments. And all of the commandments, as principles governing covenant relationships, are founded on the ultimate OT statement of relationship, which stands as prologue to the ten commandments: “I am Yahweh, your God” Because Yahweh is, and is Israel’s God, Israel both is and must become a certain and special people. What Israel is and is to be is determined by Yahweh’s gift of himself to them first, and second, by their gift of themselves to him in response. That response involves Yahweh first (commandments one through four) and all humankind second (commandments five through six).”²¹⁸

Overview—Honoring Father and Mother

In this command to honor father and mother comes a “transition from Yahweh’s expectation of his people in relation to himself to his expectation of his people in relation to the human family. . . . Just as the relationship with Yahweh is the beginning of the covenant, so this relationship is the beginning of society, the inevitable point of departure for every human relationship. The first relationship beyond the relationship with Yahweh, who according to the OT is the giver of life, is the relationship to father and to mother, who together are the channel of Yahweh’s gift of life. No other human relationship is so fundamental, and none is more important. The fifth commandment is thus both as foundational to commandments six through ten as the first commandment is to commandments two through four, and also is the logical link from the relationship of Israel to Yahweh to the relationship of Israel to humankind.”²¹⁹

Douglas Stuart also writes the following:

The prior commandments were all concerned in one way or another with the necessity of honoring God as a basic means of keeping his covenant. Now comes a commandment that follows logically because it is concerned with honoring parents, who have the awesome role in the family of representing God to their children. Although this word/commandment requires children to honor their parents in all sorts of ways large and small, there can be little doubt that its most basic insistence from the point of view of establishing a responsibility that might otherwise be shirked is to demand that children take care of their parents in their parents’ old age, when they are no longer able to work for themselves, as well as to honor whatever their parents have prescribed by way of inheritance for their children. Thus the commandment is followed by the promise of living long in the promised land. Just as parents who have lived long in their own personal lives need to be cared for at the end of those long lives, so Israel as a nation (not every individual therein) would be able to enjoy a long life in the land God was given them.

This commandment is thus like the one that precedes it in linking the requirement to an action of God: As God rested on the creation Sabbath, so individual Israelites must do so each week in their own families; as God promises to take care of his dependents, Israel,

²¹⁸ Durham, Exodus, 290.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

for a long time in the promised land, so individual Israelites must take care of their dependent parents for a long time, as necessary, in their own families. The prior commandment looks back on the creation Sabbath, whereas the present commandment looks forward to the nation's tenure in the land of promise. There is not promise here of individually long life spans. Rather the promise refers to God's protection for this covenant people if and as long as they keep his covenant.²²⁰

Like Stuart, several other scholars suggest that the primary addressees of the command are adult children who are instructed to care for their aged parents (cf. Mark 7:9-13; 1 Tim 5:4-8), though no one limits it to this idea alone.²²¹ For example, Walter Harrelson writes that it would be rash "to assume too quickly that the commandment . . . meant to bend the will of the children to that of the parents. The Decalogue is directed first of all to adults, to the adult male members of the community of Israel. Younger members of the community are not excluded, but they are certainly not the focus of attention. . . . Parents are to be respected and cared for in their time of feebleness, diminished activity, or senility. When they enter upon their 'sabbath' rest, they are to be shown respect and honor such as they were shown in their time of active membership in the community."²²² Patrick Miller writes the following about the addressees of the command:

The Commandments are not restricted by age or gender. They are taught to the young, who are part of the assembly of the people so that they have them in their heart whenever, whoever, and whatever age they may be when the issues with which they deal arise. The starting point for the honor of father and mother, therefore, is the adult child and the particular responsibilities that accrue to that person relative to the care of parents. But the child grows into those responsibilities, and there is not some point at which the commandment is not applicable and some point where it suddenly takes effect.²²³

The responsibility for care of older parents as a basic intent of the commandment may be inferred from the implicit address of all the commandments first to adult members of the community and then, in the educational process, to the children as they grow up. That responsibility, however, is not laid out elsewhere in the legal statutes of the Torah or even in the Old Testament generally as the meaning or intent of the commandment, which is why one should resist seeing in this important responsibility the sole meaning of the commandment.²²⁴

Textual Notes

²²⁰ Douglas K. Stuart, Exodus, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 461-62.

²²¹ For more on how the commandments connect to the ideas of household and land in Israel, see Christopher J. H. Wright, "The Israelite Household and the Decalogue: The Social Background and Significance of Some Commandments," Tyndale Bulletin 30 (1979): 101-24. For example, he writes that "violation of parental authority, rejection of the domestic jurisdiction of the head of the household, was a crime against the stability of the nation inasmuch as it was an attack upon that on which the nation's relationship with God was grounded – the household" (114).

²²² Harrelson, "No Contempt," 239.

²²³ Miller, Ten Commandments, 175.

²²⁴ Ibid., 181.

The Hebrew verb used here for “honor” is *kabed*, which means “be heavy, weighty, burdensome, honoured.”²²⁵ It has the same root as the noun *kabod*, often used for “glory” throughout the OT. Durham writes, “The piel imperative singular [*kbd*] means ‘honor, give weight to, glorify, esteem,’ in the sense of giving a place of precedence, of taking someone seriously. This verb is so used both of human beings, as here, and of Yahweh.”²²⁶ A few examples are below:

Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: “I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,” but now the LORD declares: “Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.” (1 Sam 2:30)

Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. (Isa 24:15)

Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce. (Prov 3:9)

J. A. Motyer explains that the word “is used of what is important or substantial (Gen. 13:2; Ezek. 27:25), serious (Gen. 18:20; Isa. 24:20, NIV, ‘heavy’), dignified and possessing status (Job 14:21; 2 Sam. 6:20). The honouring of parents therefore gives them the importance, seriousness and dignity that is their right.”²²⁷ Durham also adds, “To ‘give honor’ to father and mother means more than to be subject to them, or respectful of their wishes: they are to be given precedence by the recognition of the importance which is theirs by right, esteemed for their priority, and loved for it as well. As Yahweh is honored for his priority to all life, so father and mother must be honored for their priority, as Yahweh’s instruments, to the lives of their children. Lev 19:3, in the chapter of the Holiness Code that gives special application of the Decalogue, even uses [*yr’*] ‘have reverence for, stand in awe of,’ instead of [*kbd*] in the repetition of the fifth commandment.”²²⁸

Miller also writes on what it means to “honor”:

All sorts of things may be aspects of rendering honor to another. One may presume that the positive, with its more general openness, is intentional. At least it is what the present form of the text provides, thus presenting the hearer with a broad range of space in which to attend to the commandment. Whatever renders honor to a parent on the part of a child is implicitly commanded in the Fifth Commandment. Its aim, therefore, is broad rather than narrow. Other commandments may start out with an apparently narrow focus that then reveals itself to be broader as the commandments are elaborated; this commandment works in reverse. We are given a large command, to which we bring an existing and broad understanding of the meaning of honor and thereby learn how we live by the command.²²⁹

²²⁵ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001), 457.

²²⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 291.

²²⁷ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus, Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 227 n. 29.

²²⁸ Durham, *Exodus*, 291.

²²⁹ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 176.

Many commentators note the equal status given to the mother in this verse—for example, Durham: “The equal status of the mother in this and other versions of the fifth commandment ([Hebrew] of Lev 19:3 even puts ‘mother’ before ‘father’) is significant”²³⁰; Nahum Sarna: “The command applies equally to son and daughter irrespective of their age, and it holds for both parents”²³¹; and Miller:

One should not miss what is one of the most obvious aspects of the commandment: the inclusion of both parents as recipients of honor. All the forms of the commandment, negative as well as positive, include the mother with the father. The commandment, therefore, is not tied to any particular social structure but to the nature of the family. The mother as much as the father is due the honor and reverence of her children.²³²

The promise that “your days may be long in the land” and the “implied warning that follow the fifth commandment are unique in the Decalogue. . . . These words must be read in the light of such texts as Exod 21:15, 17; Lev 20:9; and Deut 21:18-21; 27:16. Disrespect for one’s parents was a serious offense in the covenant community, and rebellion against them was punishable by death, precisely because such disrespect and rebellion constituted disobedience of Yahweh. The addition to the fifth commandment thus has a double meaning: while appropriate honor accorded father and mother could contribute for a number of reasons to the length of one’s days in Yahweh’s promised land, a lack of respect for them could just as certainly mean an abrupt end to those days.”²³³

R. Alan Cole also writes regarding the promise, “Sometimes over-sensitive souls have queried the morality of a promise attached to a commandment. But the Hebrew does not necessarily imply that the promised blessing is our motive for keeping the commandment, while it certainly assures us that it will be the result. Others query the material nature of the promise. But, in Old Testament days, God’s promises are usually couched in material terms, understandable by those who are still, as it were, in God’s school. To those who had as yet no sure knowledge of a future life, ‘length of days’ (understood as long life in this world) meant possibility of extended communion with God, and was of great importance. Others, however, regard it as a promise of security in the tenure of the land that God will have given them: this in turn will be glorifying to God, as showing His faithfulness to His promises. We, with a fuller revelation, may fairly ‘spiritualize’ such a promise without evacuating it of content.”²³⁴

Deuteronomy

The wording of the command in Deuteronomy is slightly different, though the central idea is the same: “Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your

²³⁰ Durham, Exodus, 291.

²³¹ Nahum M. Sarna, Exodus, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 113.

²³² Miller, Ten Commandments, 180.

²³³ Durham, Exodus, 292.

²³⁴ R. Alan Cole, Exodus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 159.

days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Deut 5:16).

The NT

There are a few different places in the NT where the commandment is directly relevant. The first of these is Jesus calling out certain Jewish leaders for breaking the commandment in order to keep their tradition:

He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.” (Matt 15:3-6; also in Mark 7:9-13)

On this passage, one scholar explains that “evidence from the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Philo, and archaeological information indicates that prior to the first century AD negative vows that affected others were already being made. Mark 7:9-13 shows that, in the first century CE, a son could make a vow using the term qorban and prohibit his parents from receiving support from him. Even though such a vow violated the fifth commandment, some Jewish teachers upheld such a vow, perhaps because of the biblical teaching on the inviolability of vows.”²³⁵ Jesus judged such an approach to be a violation of the fifth commandment.

Another text is in Ephesians 6:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” (Eph 6:1-3)

This passage highlights that “such promise clauses are unusual in the Commandments” and suggests that “the motivation or promise plays a real part in the commandment and is to be incorporated in the hearer’s appropriation of it.”²³⁶ Furthermore, both Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21 (“Fathers, do not provoke your children”) suggest “the possibility—and one may assume that possibility at times becomes actuality—of parents abusing their children and thus makes it clear that the responsibility commanded in this commandment is clearly a two-way street.”²³⁷

Though the commandment is not explicitly cited, in principle a final example is Paul’s concern that families take care of their widows, which would connect to the idea that the most fundamental idea behind the commandment is adult children caring for their aged parents:

²³⁵ Jon Nelson Bailey, “Vowing Away the Fifth Commandment: Matthew 15:3-6//Mark 7:9-13,” *Restoration Quarterly* 42 (2000): 209.

²³⁶ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 203.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. . . . But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Tim 5:3-4, 8)

Extension of the Fifth Commandment to Other Authorities

A common discussion with the fifth commandment is the “way in which it opens up the question of how human beings deal with and respond to figures in authority over them other than father and mother. For Luther, obedience to the civil authority was enjoined by this commandment because that authority ‘belongs in the category of “fatherhood” as a walk of life, and is the most comprehensive of all’²³⁸. . . . Calvin also saw a further authority derivative from parental authority and to be honored by the command of God.”²³⁹ Douma argues that this approach “seems entirely justified when we investigate the broad sense in which the Bible speaks of fatherhood. There is many a ‘father’ to whom appropriate honor and obedience are due.”²⁴⁰ Miller highlights Romans 13, which begins by Paul saying that all should “be subject to the governing authorities” before connecting to part of the Decalogue in verses 8-10.²⁴¹ Interesting in these verses is the idea of giving to all what is owed them, including “respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” (13:7). Thus, the “position of authority is like that of the parents for their children. It is not because of something inherent in their positions but because they are part of God’s rule of the community. Learning honor of parents is an opening to learning how to respect authorities of other sorts.”²⁴²

General Scholarly Comment

Terence E. Fretheim

No interhuman relationship is so basic as that between children and parents. It is a fundamental order of creation. At no age do people cease to be children of parents. The importance of this command is measured not simply by its foundational relationship to society but also by its nurturing role for those who will inevitably function in that context.

If this commandment were written today, it would no doubt take into account the grave problem of child abuse and lift up parental responsibility toward children (see Eph. 6:2-4). At one point the commandment does have a contemporary ring; it places father and mother together as equally to be honored (see Lev. 19:3). This is striking, given the evident patriarchal character of Israelite society. If the commandment reflects the divine concern and authority exercised through the

²³⁸ Cited from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minnesota: Fortress, 2000), 407.

²³⁹ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 208-09.

²⁴⁰ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 178.

²⁴¹ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 213.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 212.

parent, the female as divine representative is even more noteworthy. This is consonant with the use of both mother and father as metaphors for God (see Isa. 64:8; 66:13).

The positive formulation, along with the use of the wide-ranging verb “honor,” means that there is no one specific behavior that is commanded. It is an open-ended commandment, inviting children to respond in any way that honors parents. In all dealings with parents, respect, esteem, having regard and concern for, and showing affection, considerateness, and appreciation are the order of the day (see 21:15, 17). It has been shown . . . that the commandment is directed more toward adults than children. Perhaps especially in mind are cases where elderly parents are misused or abused when their working and/or mental powers have significantly receded. This dimension also shows that obedience is not at the center of what it means to honor. These aspects of the command should be clearly evident in the teaching of children, so as not to imply that they are the special objects of its concern or that there will come a day when this obligation has been removed.

This command has become exceedingly complex in a day of increased longevity, when social security income, nursing homes, and extended medical care for the elderly are so much a part of life. Governmental authority at various levels has often been given responsibility for this commandment; adult children in particular will need to examine carefully how well they or their governmental surrogates are handling the above-noted characteristics of “honor.” While there is no commandment relating to other authorities such as state or judiciary (see 22:28), this one has been so extended by the Reformers on the basis of such texts as Prov. 24:21 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. While a host of issues is raised thereby, it is a legitimate extension, not least because such authorities have been granted a “parental” role in many situations.

The unique extension of the commandment, “that your days may be long,” is neither strictly promise (cf. Eph. 6:2) nor implied warning (though severe judgments for some acts against parents are noted in 21:15, 17). This is matter-of-fact moral order talk, more typical of Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:40; 5:33; 22:7; 25:15). That is, the effect of such conduct is intrinsic to the deed; forensic judgments will be rare. If the commandment is obeyed, life will go better for one, generally speaking. But this is not inevitably the case, nor is there some point in life at which one can say that such a word has been fulfilled. . . . On the other hand, if the commandment is not obeyed, then the effects on life are apt to be negative. Again, not inevitably so; characteristic of such moral order talk is a loose causal weave, a highly important factor in Old Testament theology.²⁴³

Nahum Sarna

This command forms the transition from the first to the second group of divine declarations, in that it simultaneously possesses both religious and social dimensions. It shares with the preceding command the formula “the LORD your God.” Also, the relationship of Israel to God is often expressed metaphorically in filial terms, and the same verbs of “honoring” and “revering” are used in expressing proper human attitudes to both God and parents. In fact, the obligation to respect is enjoined only for God and parents, and the offender in either instance is liable to the extreme penalty. The parallels point up the supreme importance that the Torah assigns to the integrity of the family for the sake of the stability of society and generational continuity. Family

²⁴³ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 231-32.

life is the bedrock on which Jewish society stands. No other item in the Decalogue is similarly formulated wholly in positive terms, and for none other is there a promise of reward.²⁴⁴

Walter Kaiser

The fifth commandment, to “honor” one’s parents, involves (1) prizing them highly (cf. Prov 4:8; i.e., wisdom, when sought above everything else and prized more highly than all else, will bring honor to its seekers); (2) caring, showing affection for them (Ps 91:15; i.e., God’s honoring of individuals is shown by his care for them in being with them and delivering them from trouble); and (3) showing respect, fear, or revering them (Lev 19:3). When Ephesians 6:1 says, “Obey your parents,” it immediately and necessarily qualifies it with “in the Lord.” Parents are to be shown honor (v. 2), but nowhere is their word to rival or be a substitute for God’s Word.²⁴⁵

J. A. Motyer

Our ‘vertical’ relationship to God and our ‘horizontal’ relationship to those around us must be in harmony. The second ‘great’ commandment, said Jesus, is ‘like’ the first (Matt. 22:39), and therefore obedience to the first must be reflected in obedience to the second. Relationships matter as deeply as that. But one set of relationships in particular take precedence. The fifth commandment is deliberately linked with the fourth by its positive form, so that the passage from the first half of the law to the second is seamless. The fourth commandment deals with the ordering of life in imitation of God, the fifth deals with achieving security of life by the honouring of parents. The life ordered according to God’s priorities will receive his blessing (11); the honouring of parents is the key to social stability and security of tenure in the land. When we step out of the arena of ‘duty of God’, we step into the arena of duty within the family, our foremost area of obligation in the world.

The fifth commandment is addressed to children, and this is significant. Covenant law has regard to the family born within the covenant and imposes its obligations on the children of covenant parents. It treats such children as members of the covenant people, having just as much been ‘brought out’ by the blood of the lamb as their parents. It makes its promises to them and imposes its obligations upon them. Just as children, from infancy, come within the circle of covenant blessing (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39), so from childhood they must be taught to follow covenant ways and obey covenant law. We note also the equality accorded to both parents, for an identical attitude is required towards the father as towards the mother.²⁴⁶

R. Alan Cole

For the same principle [of the fifth commandment], in another form, see Exodus 21:15, 17: ‘whoever strikes/curses his father or his mother shall be put to death’. This is called ‘the first commandment with promise’ (Eph. 6:2), and so it is, in the strict sense of the word, although verse 6, where God shows ‘covenant love’ to those who love and obey Him, is also virtually a promise. Nevertheless, God’s promise is clearer here, and works itself out in human societies. Those who build a society in which old age has an honoured place may with confidence expect

²⁴⁴ Sarna, Exodus, 113.

²⁴⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 424.

²⁴⁶ Motyer, Exodus, 227-28.

to enjoy that place themselves one day. This is not a popular doctrine in our modern world, where youth is worshipped, and old age dreaded or despised. The result is the folly by which men or women strive to remain eternally youthful, only to find it an impossible task. This commandment is part of the general attitude of Israel to old age (as symbolizing and ideally embodying the practical wisdom of life) commended throughout the Old Testament (Lv. 19:32), and found in many other ancient peoples, notably the Chinese. . . . This commandment is the point at which attention shifts from relations with God to relations with the community that He has created. So the total contents of the ten commandments must be summed up in two ‘words’, not one: love to God and love to our neighbour (Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18). Again, there is no contradiction: the reality of our stated love to God is shown by the reality of our expressed love towards our fellow men (Je. 22:16).²⁴⁷

Peter Enns

Many have suggested over the long history of interpretation that honoring “your father and your mother” necessarily extends to other people of authority in the community. This seems somewhat justifiable in light of the fact that the titles “father” and “mother” were applied to individuals other than parents (e.g., Judg. 5:7; 1 Sam. 24:11; 2 Kings 5:13). But expanding the areas of application does not help us in understanding the essence of the command itself. Various questions arise. What does “honor” of one’s parents mean? Does it mean doing what they say no matter what? What if the parents are wrong? Is there ever a time when children outgrow this commandment?

In light of the ambiguity of this and other commandments, it seems to me that we may be asking too much from them. The Ten Commandments are consistently ambiguous, and I suggest this is not just the case for us but for the ancient Israelites themselves. The purpose of the Ten Commandments is to tell us God’s “pattern of conduct.” They reveal to the Israelites a bit of who God is, knowledge that must translate into appropriate behavior on their part. In other words, as glimpses into the nature of God and his relationship with his people, the Ten Commandments are not exhaustive pieces of legislation that account for each and every contingency and possibility. They are to be obeyed, but as to how, that is a matter of continual reflection by the Israelites as they continue to live and grow in the shadow of God’s love and protection. Examples of specific applications of these commandments are found in chapters 21-23.

As Paul notes in Ephesians 6:2, this is “the first commandment with a promise.” Honoring one’s parents means long life in the land. But this should not be understood in an individual sense. In other words, dishonoring one’s parents does not mean that a child (whether young or old) will die before his or her time. Rather, the reference to length of stay in the land is a warning to the Israelites as a whole (cf. Deut. 4:40; 5:32-33), a fact that underscores just how important this command is. By breaking God’s commands, the people will jeopardize their possession of the land God has given them. This “promise” is not personal blessing, but a blessing for a people to possess a land under God’s rule and thus become a light to the nations.²⁴⁸

Conclusion

²⁴⁷ Cole, Exodus, 158-59.

²⁴⁸ Enns, Exodus, 420-21.

The command to honor parents was foundational to Israel since the entire structure of life was built upon the household. This is part of the reason that their days would be “long in the land” if they honored their parents. Caring for aged parents was certainly critical for this, though there are many other ways that children must honor their parents, including taking to heart their instruction, loving them well, and being faithful to them in a variety of circumstances.²⁴⁹ The reality is that “each of us has been parented. No matter how old we become, no matter how many children we ourselves may have, we never get over being children of God and our parents.”²⁵⁰ Thus, we owe continual gratitude and honor to those who have nurtured us.

SIXTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 13

Introduction

The sixth commandment prohibits unlawful killing and begins a set of short, rapid-fire commands: “The next four commandments are briefer than the fifth. They contain no explanation or threat of consequences. In each, the general gist is clear enough, but they defy a definitive, fuller explication.”²⁵¹ Another scholar explains that while most societies count “murder, adultery and theft as forbidden acts,” the Decalogue is unique “in making their prohibition into ‘fundamental, abstract, eternal principles, which transcend any condition . . . circumstance . . . definition’. It is also typical, we might add, of the Old Testament to make no distinction between crimes (committed against people) and sins (committed against God). The origin of the social prohibitions here is the will of God, reflecting the character of God and expressing the fundamental rule, ‘You must be what you must be, because I am what I am.’”²⁵² The main issues in this text are the precise meaning of the Hebrew word *ratsah* (“kill, murder”) and how the principle behind the command extends beyond the text in Exodus.

Overview—No Killing/Murder

In this command, “only two words are used in Hebrew, as blunt as the order ‘no killing’ would be in English. Hebrew *rāṣaḥ* is a comparatively rare word for ‘kill’, and usually implies violent killing of a personal enemy . . . : ‘murder’ is a good translation (RV, NEB) [though see further

²⁴⁹ Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 172-73.

²⁵⁰ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 68.

²⁵¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 421.

²⁵² J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus, Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 228.

discussion in the section below]. The command is stated in its most general form, but the law clearly distinguished between planned and accidental or unpremeditated killings (Ex. 21:12-14). Certainly this command was never seen by Hebrews as ruling out the death penalty (Ex. 21:15), although this is usually expressed by a verb corresponding to ‘put to death’, not by ‘kill’. Also, there were no pacifists in Old Testament days. Whether the fuller light of the New Testament demands such conclusions or not, they cannot be proved from the Old Testament alone. As in verse 16, the prohibition seems addressed in the first place towards killing of a ‘neighbour’, a member of the same covenant-community. In any case, the sanctity of life, as God’s gift, is established: hence ‘blood-guiltiness’ is an awful reality, from the time of Cain onwards (Gn. 4:10).”²⁵³

Brevard Childs also explains that “parallels to the commandment against the taking of life are found elsewhere in the Pentateuch in a longer form (cf. Ex. 21.12; Lev. 24.17; Deut. 27.24). Particularly in Lev. 19.17ff. the scope of the command has been internalized to cover also hating one’s brother in one’s heart. Lying behind the prohibition to kill is the very ancient sanctity of life, which was understood as contained in the blood: ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed’ (Gen. 9.6).”²⁵⁴ Similarly, Walter Kaiser writes that the “ethical theology that lies behind this prohibition is the fact that all men and women have been created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27; 9:6),”²⁵⁵ and J. A. Motyer also agrees that “Genesis 9:6 makes the fact that humankind bears the divine image the reason why murder is both a crime and a sin, and it is, indeed, the ground of the rightness, and justice of the death penalty.”²⁵⁶

Textual Notes

As already mentioned, the sixth commandment is made up of only two words, *lo’ tirtsah*: “never kill/murder.” On the form of this command and those that follow, Stuart writes, “Grammatically, the prohibition expressed in this and the following commandments, through the construction *lō’* + imperfect verb form, is perhaps most idiomatically rendered ‘you must not . . .’ or ‘you cannot . . .’ in modern English. This modal sense was once inherent in English in a wording such as ‘thou shalt not’/‘you shall not,’ but it is no longer automatically recognizable therein so that ‘you shall not’ or ‘you will not’ sound almost like predictions rather than the firm prohibitions they are in Hebrew. Moreover, the prohibition here and in the following commandments is not expressed through the vetitive (e.g., *’al* + imperfect), which would represent a temporary injunction against a behavior, but through the permanent negative imperative (*lō’* + imperfect), which could be rendered ‘never murder’ or the like.”²⁵⁷

Most of the textual discussion of the sixth commandment revolves around the precise meaning of the Hebrew verb *ratsah* (r-ts-h are the three foundational consonants). John Durham notes that the verb “occurs just over forty times in the OT, far less frequently than the more general term [*hrg*] ‘kill, slay, destroy,’ (more than 160 times) and the *hiphil* of [*mwt*] ‘cause to die, kill’ (more

²⁵³ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 160-61.

²⁵⁴ Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 419.

²⁵⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 424.

²⁵⁶ Motyer, *Exodus*, 228.

²⁵⁷ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, *New American Commentary*, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 463.

than 200 times).”²⁵⁸ He continues, explaining that the word “plainly refers to killing that can be understood to be murder (so Ps 94:6b or 1 Kgs 21:19), and some translators so render it (see NEB, for example); but [rtsh] can also refer to unintentional killing, ‘manslaughter,’ as in Deut 19:3, 4, 6, and Josh 20:3, and to the legal execution of a convicted killer, as in Num 35:30.”²⁵⁹ Thus, we should be cautious about defining the Hebrew term itself strictly with the word “murder.” Durham writes that “whatever broadening of application it may have had in later years, its basic prohibition was against killing, for whatever cause, under whatever circumstances, and by whatever method, a fellow-member of the covenant community.”²⁶⁰ Though it is somewhat circular, it is probably best to see in the command the idea of illegal killing (war and capital punishment, for example, were clearly allowed in Israel). Stuart writes similarly, “The Hebrew term used here (rṣḥ) is, however, specific to putting to death improperly, for selfish reasons rather than with authorization (as killing in the administration of justice or killing in divinely ordained holy war would be).”²⁶¹ Finally, Kaiser offers a summary view on the word:

While Hebrew possesses seven words for killing, the word used here—rāṣaḥ—appears only forty-seven times in the OT. If any one of the seven words could signify ‘murder,’ where the factors of premeditation and intentionality are present, this is the verb. Recently, however, some have complained (see Childs, Exodus, p. 420), for the bibliography and argument) that many of the instances of this verb related to blood vengeance and the role of the avenger (gô’ēl in Num 35; Deut 4:41-43; 19:1-13; Josh 20:3). Without exception, however, in the later periods (e.g., Ps 94:6; Prov 22:13; Isa 1:21; Hos 4:2; 6:9; Jer 7:9) it carries the idea of murder with intentional violence. Every one of these instances stresses the act or allegation of premeditation and deliberateness—and that is at the heart of this verb. Thus this prohibition does not apply to beasts (Gen 9:3), to defending one’s home from night-time burglars (Exod 22:2), to accidental killings (Deut 19:5), to the execution of murderers by the state (Gen 9:6), or to involvement with one’s nation in certain types of war as illustrated by Israel’s history. It does apply, however, to self-murder (i.e., suicide), to all accessories to murder (2 Sam 12:9), and to those who have authority but fail to use it to punish known murderers (1 Kings 21:19).²⁶²

The Sixth Commandment and the Rest of the OT

The sixth commandment is found in identical form in Deuteronomy 5:17. Additionally, Patrick Miller surveys the trajectory of the command throughout the rest of the OT. Numbers 35 “has to do with how the community should handle the killing of one of its members,” and in this context “taking a human life is such a large matter that even the ‘legitimate’ taking of life, the legal execution of either a manslayer who has left the city of refuge (v. 27) or a murderer (v. 30), is spoken of in this context with the verb [ratsah].”²⁶³ In Exodus 20:22-23:19 (“The Book of the

²⁵⁸ John I. Durham, Exodus, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 292.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. For more detailed discussion of the term in OT scholarship, see Childs, Exodus, 419-21.

²⁶⁰ Durham, Exodus, 293.

²⁶¹ Stuart, Exodus, 463.

²⁶² Kaiser, “Exodus,” 424-25.

²⁶³ Patrick D. Miller, The Ten Commandments, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 227.

Covenant”), there is a “concern for developing a way of protecting life and dealing with the situation when life is taken,” and in Deuteronomy 19:1-22:8 virtually all the statutes “have to do with matters of life and death or with the protection of life.”²⁶⁴ With regard to Leviticus 24:15-22 Miller writes, “that the sixth commandment underlies this is surely clear,” and it is also relevant to the *lex talionis* (“eye for an eye”) found in Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:17-21, and Deuteronomy 19:21: “The provision for justice that is inherent in the talionic principle begins with the valuing and protection of life and, as we have seen again and again, moves out from there into concern for the neighbor’s physical well-being in all respects, the protection of one’s neighbor from harm of any sort.”²⁶⁵

In addition to the legal code, the “weight of this commandment for the life of the human community is evident in the degree to which the issue of protecting life against its endangerment is played out in the various stories and narratives of Israel’s history. While there are all too many stories of murder and killing in the Old Testament, some seem particularly reflective of the concern or indicative of the range of applicability of the commandment protecting life.”²⁶⁶ Miller goes on to explore Cain murdering Abel in Genesis 4:1-16, the command to Noah in Genesis 9:1-7, the story of Joseph in Genesis 37, the rape and murder of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19-20, the killing of Naboth by Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kings 21, the death of Uriah at the hands of David in 2 Samuel 11-12, Saul’s pursuit of David in 1 Samuel 18-19, and the account of Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom in 2 Samuel 13.²⁶⁷ Throughout the OT is a concern for protecting life, with dire consequences resulting when innocent blood is shed.

The Sixth Commandment and the NT

The sixth commandment against killing “is cited several times in the New Testament. Indeed, it is one of two commandments—the other being the prohibition of adultery—that are always cited in the partial lists of commandments found throughout the New Testament (Matt. 5:21; 19:18//Mark 10:19//Luke 18:20; Rom. 13:9; Jas. 2:11; cf. Didache 2:2). In most of these instances, the commandment is simply quoted.”²⁶⁸ The Greek word for “kill/murder” that is used in the LXX of Exodus 20:13 to translate the Hebrew *is phoneuō*. Its root is also used often in the NT to denote murder, being found in both verb form (*phoneuō*) and noun form (*phonos*) and also used for the perpetrator, “murderer” (*phoneus*). Below are some examples, with words having the *phon-* root in boldface:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matt 5:21-22)

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. (Matt 15:19; also Mark 7:21)

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 229, 231.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 244.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 248.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 248-62.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 265-66.

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt 19:16-19; parallels in Mark 10:17-19; Luke 18:18-20)

Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. . . . so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. (Matt 23:31, 35)

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered. (Acts 7:52)

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. (Rom 1:29)

For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Rom 13:9)

For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. (Jas 2:11)

You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. (Jas 4:2)

But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. (1 Pet 4:15)

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (Rev 21:8)

Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Rev 22:15)

Miller further explores Jesus' saying in the Sermon on the Mount where he compares anger to murder (Matt 5:21-22). Here "Jesus in no sense sets the law aside or alters it. Rather, he continues the trajectory already developing in the Old Testament legal traditions. There one hears about not killing one's neighbor out of hatred or enmity (e.g., Num. 35). Now Jesus carries that further, teaching a way of not letting anger and hatred—which corresponds to anger or

follows from it . . . —take over and, implicitly, stopping the harmful actions that arise from those emotions.”²⁶⁹ He continues with regard to the rest of the NT and is worth quoting at length:

What Jesus initiates here continues in the New Testament and the Christian tradition generally as the community learns not to be angry or to deal with that anger in various ways so that it does not erupt in harmful activity. The instruction of Ephesians 4 is indicative of this with its words about not letting the sun go down on one’s anger. Anger may happen, but it needs to be dealt with, as Jesus also indicates. Ephesians 4:26 gives the practical advice of not letting the day end with one’s anger still seething. That is when it goes deeper. No word is said about acts of reconciliation, as in Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, but further along in this very concrete instruction about the way of Christian living, a counter way is suggested, again following the implicit understanding of the Commandments as having a positive teaching along with the negative:

³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. ¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph. 4:31-5:2)

Jesus’ teaching pointed toward specific acts of reconciliation; what we find here is a more general word that leads in the same direction: acts and dispositions of kindness, setting aside anger and malice, and forgiving those whose words and acts may have aroused dangerous anger and bitterness Ultimately what is in view is the familiar word of loving the neighbor, here undergirded and underscored by the example of Christ, a love of neighbor that is self-giving rather than neighbor-harming.

. . . Both Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and the rules for life in community articulated in Ephesians 4 are echoed or recapitulated in 1 John 3:11-15, where hatred of one’s brother is equated with murder and the counterway is a love that imitates Christ in the willingness to “lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). Love rather than hatred is what the Commandments are about, a fundamental principle articulated first in the Decalogue-like chapter 19 of Leviticus (vv. 17-18) and rearticulated by both Jesus (Matt. 5:43-48) and Paul (Rom. 13:8-10).

Finally, one notes that the *lex talionis* of the Old Testament is taken up by Jesus in the Sermon (Matt. 5:38-42). The guard against vengeance inherent in the talionic principle is assumed in his teaching The antithesis he puts forward, then, is in behalf of discerning what the love command presupposes and demands. Here nonretaliation is not simply a passive response to the act of the evildoer (Matt. 5:39). It is an aggressive move to overcome the evil with good (Rom. 12:20-21). The point is not so much nonviolence in general as it is desisting retaliation in specific instances.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 266.

. . . An appropriate conclusion to thinking about the New Testament teaching may be found in Karl Barth's own concluding comment about the biblical instruction against killing:

In the final New Testament form in which we have to hear and understand it, the commandment: "Thou shalt not kill," reaches us in such a way that in all the detailed problems which may arise we cannot exclude the exceptional case and yet we cannot assert too sharply that it is genuinely exceptional. In other words, we cannot overemphasise the arguments against it, nor raise too strongly the question whether even what seems to be justifiable homicide might not really be murder. (Church Dogmatics, III/4:400)²⁷⁰

The Sixth Commandment and Contemporary Issues

The command not to kill unlawfully relates to a number of other issues, and space precludes a detailed analysis of each one. However, it is sufficient to make a few comments. J. Douma begins his treatment by highlighting the respect for all living things accorded in the OT. Man does not have absolute authority over everything, rather the "fact that we have any say at all with respect to the life of plants and animals . . . is a kind of sovereignty bestowed upon us," and this must be used with care.²⁷¹ Further, if "we should respect everything that lives, then surely that applies to human life. Plants and animals are called creatures of God, but only people have been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27)."²⁷² This reality, then, has ramifications for a number of contemporary issues. Examples include abortion, euthanasia, suicide, negligent homicide, and capital punishment.²⁷³

Another one is self-defense, on which Douma writes the following: "You shall not kill unlawfully," says the sixth commandment. Someone can be killed by another person, however, without that killing being unlawful. . . . Recall the biblical example of an intruder: If a thief caught breaking and entering received a fatal blow, that would not be considered a culpable killing (Ex. 22:2)."²⁷⁴ However, he goes on to note that "what is remarkable is that culpability is involved when such an intruder is killed in broad daylight (Ex. 22:3). In the darkness of night, the situation is confused. . . . But during the daytime the situation is clearer, and then everything must be done to prevent bloodshed. From this twofold regulation we see how precious human life is."²⁷⁵ So while there is not always culpability for the taking of life, neither should it ever be taken lightly. All measures to avoid the shedding of blood must be exercised. This logic would also extend to the reality of war.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 267-69.

²⁷¹ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 207.

²⁷² Ibid., 210.

²⁷³ See *ibid.*, 217-29, 234-39, for a treatment of each.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 234.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ For more on the subject of war and the sixth commandment, see *ibid.*, 239-41; also Gary M. Simpson, "'Thou Shalt Not Kill'—The First Commandment of the Just War Tradition," in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 249-65, who argues that pacifism has "two sides: the 'critical' side and the 'positive' side. The critical side is 'no war, no violence, no sword, by anyone under any circumstances.' The positive side of pacifism is 'work tirelessly, vigorously, and endlessly for the

General Scholarly Comment

Terence E. Fretheim

The last six (five) commandments have to do with relationships among social equals. This commandment has come in for more than its share of consideration over the years, not least in more recent times. Those concerned about war, capital punishment, suicide, euthanasia, self-defense, and abortion have all appealed to it in one way or another. Though the command does not make these distinctions, one is faced not only with its meaning but with its possible legitimate extensions.

The meaning of the verb “to kill” (rašah) has been much debated. In view of certain passages (e.g., 1 Kings 21:19) it has been suggested that the verb means murder (so NEB; NRSV). It can also, however, refer to unintentional killing (Deut. 4:41-42) or to the execution of a convicted killer (Num 35:30); it is never used of killing in war. Scholars have sought more refined meanings, from blood feuds to illegal violence against an Israelite to taking the law into one’s own hands. Probably its meaning changed over the years in view of shifting historical circumstances, but that is difficult to demonstrate.

Perhaps the command is best seen to function in 21:12 and Num. 35:20-21: any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstances and by whatever method, that might result in death (even if killing was not the intention). “Murder” does not sufficiently capture this sense for the word. The more general word “kill” serves the community of faith best, forcing continual reflection on the meaning of the commandment and reminding all that in the taking of human life for any reason one acts in God’s stead, in the face of which there should be a lengthy pause filled with careful soul-searching and the absence of vengefulness and arrogance. As a result, taking a human life should be very rare indeed.

The basis of the command is that all life belongs to God (Lev. 17:11; Gen. 9:6). The divine intention in creation is that no life be taken. Life is thus not for human beings to do with as they will; they are not God. It is up to God to determine what shall be done with life. The issue thus becomes one of discernment regarding that divine determination. Human beings are never to kill on their own authority; they are only agents of God. Israel’s limited use of capital punishment, as specified in certain God-given laws (see 21:12-17; 22:18-20), had to do with violations of God’s created order. The issue thus became a matter of world restoration under God.

Similar arguments were used in ancient Israel for divine support in some wars. But has not this all changed today, not least with the development of nuclear arms? They constitute a threat to God’s world order unparalleled in human history. This should prompt new reflections on war and peace and hence give a new meaning to the word “kill.”

The issue of discernment regarding the divine will remains the central issue, not least in recognition of the principle, New occasions teach new duties. Who would claim, for example,

establishment of peace according to just criteria” (265). He argues that while the just war tradition cannot accept the critical side of pacifism, it has every reason to ally itself with the positive side.

that 21:15-17 is applicable today? But the criteria to be applied in many other cases are much more complex. An openness to both the limit and the extent of the meaning of the commandment beyond its original formulation for new life situations is needed, but always with God's creational intentions in view. This corresponds to Jesus' own usage in Matt. 5:21-26; he extends the commandment beyond physical violence to include verbal abuse and other manifestations of anger. Above all, he expresses the concern that reconciliation among those estranged from one another be given a high priority, even above religious practice.²⁷⁷

Douglas Stuart

The Hebrew term used here (רָשָׁח) is . . . specific to putting to death improperly, for selfish reasons rather than with authorization (as killing in the administration of justice or killing in divinely ordained holy war would be). God's Old Covenant people, being a theocratic community, were delegated the right to take human life by his command, either in the form of his capital punishment laws or his direct holy war call. No Israelite acting on his own could decide that he had the right to end someone's life.

. . . Little difference separates the practical outworking of this command today from its original application in ancient Israel. In the New Covenant the state takes the roles of administration of justice and declaration of war; the church cannot do such things. But otherwise, and from the point of view of the individual believer, the prohibition works exactly the same way: no unauthorized "private" person or group has the right to end a human life. Moreover, the ban on murder has no modifying conditions: taking one's own life or ending someone else's for purposes of "mercy" do not qualify as allowable exceptions.²⁷⁸

Peter Enns

A prohibition against murder is nothing new. Murder was reprehensible before this command was given, not only in the Pentateuch as far back as the story of Cain and Abel but in the ancient Near Eastern world as well. This is another reminder that the Ten Commandments were not new, but reiterations of what was known on some level before.

The command clearly does not mean that any taking of a human life is wrong. Killing is something both God and the Israelites, by God's approval, do throughout the Old Testament. So what is meant here? Only "wrongful" killing of another? If so, what does that mean? What of unintentional killing? Does it pertain only to the killing of human beings, or are animals included in the prohibition? Perhaps only the killing of fellow Israelites is in view. A number of specific situations are addressed in 21:12-36, but they can hardly be thought to be exhaustive. The full implications of this command are made explicit neither here nor in the chapters that follow.

The Hebrew word translated "murder" in the NIV (רָשָׁח) is a common one in the Old Testament. It is a restricted term, generally referring to the killing of someone who is not an "enemy" of the people. In other words, it is not used in contexts of war or just punishment for a crime. It can, however, refer to unintentional killing (e.g., Deut. 4:41-43), a circumstance in which "murder" is not an appropriate term. Thus, perhaps, murder is not as straightforward a translation as might be assumed. If the circularity is not too frustrating, at the very least we can state that there is legitimate and illegitimate killing in the Old Testament and that this

²⁷⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 232-34.

²⁷⁸ Stuart, *Exodus*, 462-63.

commandment refers to any type of killing that God disallows. Just what that means is, again, a matter of wise reflection on the part of the Israelite leaders.

Life is something that the God of Israel does not treat lightly, and it is thus incumbent on his people to behave likewise. W. Harrelson puts the entire matter in a helpful perspective:

In short, the sixth commandment stakes out the claim of God over all life and serves notice to all human beings—but especially those who claim the biblical heritage as binding upon them—that God’s claim upon life is to be given priority in the decisions taken by a community of its individual members.²⁷⁹

To what extent we can extrapolate from this commandment the full manner in which the Israelites are obliged to obey remains a matter of ongoing debate.²⁸⁰

Nahum Sarna

The Hebrew stem r-ts-ḥ . . . applies only to illegal killing and, unlike other verbs for the taking of life, is never used in the administration of justice or for killing in war. Also, it is never employed when the subject of the action is God or an angel. This command, therefore, cannot be used to justify either pacifism or the abolition of the death penalty, both of which would have to be argued on other grounds. Genesis 9:6 provides the rationale for the prohibition of murder: “Whoever shed the blood of man, / By man shall his blood be shed; / For in His image / Did God make man.” This means that society must exact satisfaction for the crime of murder because life, being derived from God, is infinitely precious and is His alone to give and to take. By his unspeakable act, the murderer usurps the divine prerogative and infringes upon God’s sovereignty; and, because human beings are created in the divine image, he also affronts God’s majesty.²⁸¹

Conclusion

The gravity of the sixth commandment should not be underestimated. “When we take life for any reason we put ourselves in the place of God. We steal something that God created and that God owns. Stealing from a God who is ‘jealous’ is a risky act. All life is God’s. In the Bible, when killing is done, it is done under the agency of God, not by individuals or in service to the state, for only God is to kill and to make alive.”²⁸² Thus, while the main principle in this command relates to murder, we should not allow this to mute the trauma and tragedy of even “legal” killing. The original plan was never that one person should kill another for any reason. It is only because of the reality of human sin and a disfigured and violated created order that the death of a human at the hand of another human takes place, even when it is authorized by God.

²⁷⁹ Quoted from Walter J. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 121-22.

²⁸⁰ Enns, *Exodus*, 421-22.

²⁸¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus, JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 113.

²⁸² Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 80.

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 14

Overview—On Adultery

The seventh command prohibits adultery. Adultery in the Bible can be viewed according to a spectrum of interpretation, with a specific sense on one end and a broader one on the other. J. Douma explains that the word in Hebrew for committing adultery

indicates that a man who is either married or unmarried has sexual intercourse with a married woman. He thereby destroys the [marriage] of his neighbor. He takes into his possession the woman who belongs to another man. Even if this woman is not officially married, but merely engaged to be married, the same verdict applies: the adulterer has violated his neighbor's wife (Deut. 22:24).

If a man had sexual relations with a woman who was neither married nor engaged, at least in Israel that would not have been called adultery. The decisive factor was the woman's status+: did she belong to another or not? The fact that the man himself was married would lead us, but not necessarily an Israelite, to speak of adultery. For in Israel a man could have more than one wife. Bigamy and polygamy were practiced, and having sexual relations with yet other kinds of women would frequently not have been considered adultery.

. . . It seems as if in Israel adultery was in fact a crime against property. Just as people were forbidden to violate the life or possessions of another (the sixth and eighth commandments), so too they were forbidden to do this to a neighbor's wife (seventh commandment). She was the property of that neighbor, and for this reason every other man was supposed to keep his hands off.

But we would not be doing justice to the teaching of the Old Testament if we evaluated adultery simply as a question of property. A man's wife was more than an expensive piece of chattel property. This becomes evident when we consider the distinction made in the Mosaic law between sexual intercourse with a married woman and sexual intercourse with a neighbor's slave girl. The law viewed intercourse with a slave girl not as adultery, but as a violation of the property of her owner. A special fine was assessed (Lev. 19:20-21)—something impossible in a case of adultery, which required the death penalty by

means of fire (Gen. 38:24) or stoning (Deut. 22:23-24). This degree of punishment, completely different from any fine assessed for stealing, shows that we are dealing with something other than stealing property.

. . . Adultery is much more than a crime against property. But we would be setting the limits too narrowly as well if, when discussing the seventh commandment, we restricted ourselves to the act of adultery. For in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that, as the One who has come to fulfill the whole meaning of the law, He considers even looking at another woman in order to have her to be adultery (Matt. 5:17, 28). Just as in other cases, here too Jesus reveals the depth of the commandment. We must pay attention not only to the letter of the law, but also to the spirit of the law.²⁸³

Another scholar notes how the seventh commandment “offers several important protections within the covenant community. The first of these is the protection of the marriage of one’s neighbor. As the Sixth Commandment guards the life of ‘your neighbor,’ so the Seventh Commandment guards the neighbor’s marriage. The presence of a prohibition against adultery, which from all the instances in Scripture seems to mean sexual intercourse with someone who is married, is in immediate sequence after the prohibition against killing one’s neighbor and serves to undergird and establish the importance and sanctity of the marriage relationship. This is not a protection of property. That is tended to in the next commandment. It is an explicit claim that the sexual activity between a man and woman who are married is central to the relationship and may not be disregarded. . . . The sacredness of marriage and the centrality of sexual relationships within the marriage is thus to the fore and lifted up in this commandment. While the commandment does not explicitly address fornication, an implicit word is sounded about where the sexual relationship belongs, in the marriage of a man and a woman. The commandment thus provides the starting point of a sexual ethic even as it emphasizes the importance of a person’s marriage. Your neighbor’s marriage has as much weight and protection as does his life.”²⁸⁴

Commentators often highlight the extremely negative view of adultery in the ancient Near East, where it was known as “the great sin.”²⁸⁵ Terence Fretheim writes, “This is another commandment designed to be protective of the family. Israel’s attitude toward adultery is not unique in the ancient Near East. The phrase ‘the great sin’ is used in Israel and elsewhere (see Gen. 20:9). The use of this phrase for idolatry (32:21, 30, 31) links up with the use of adultery language for Israel’s disloyalty to Yahweh (Isa. 57:1-13; Ezek. 23:36-49; Hosea). This demonstrates the seriousness with which adulterous relationships at the human level are taken. Issues of disloyalty strike against the very integrity of the marriage. The seriousness of such a violation of relationship is seen in the prescription of the death penalty (see Deut. 22:22), even

²⁸³ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 243-45.

²⁸⁴ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 274-75.

²⁸⁵ One scholar notes a parallel to the biblical phrase “great sin” (Gen 20:9; Exod 32:21, 30, 31; 2 Kgs 17:21) in Egyptian culture: “It occurs in four Egyptian marriage contracts, is also called a ‘great sin,’ and the context identifies it as adultery. This is clearly the sense of the biblical expression in Gen. 20:9 (Abimelek and Sarah), and, aware of the biblical view of idolatry as adultery, we should not hesitate to identify similarly the ‘great sin’ where it is the question of the golden calf or its later counterpart under Jeroboam” (W. L. Moran, “Scandal of the Great Sin at Ugarit,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 18 [1959]: 280). On the subject, see also Jacob J. Rabinowitz, “The ‘Great Sin’ in Ancient Egyptian Marriage Contracts,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 18 (1959): 73.

for a king (II Sam. 12:13). It is sometimes linked with sins of oppression and violence (see Job 24:13-17). Adultery is a crime against persons, but it is also a sin against God himself (Gen. 39:9; II Sam. 12:9). It violates God's creational intention, which links a positive role for sexuality with commitment and loyalty (Gen. 2:24-25).²⁸⁶

Textual Notes

The Hebrew verb used to denote “this ‘great sin,’ and the verb of the seventh commandment, is [na’ap] ‘commit adultery.’ It is used in the OT with both men and women as subject, though far more frequently of men, and, by analogy, as a designation of idol worship, the violation of the bond of covenant relationship with Yahweh. ‘Great sin’ is used in the OT of both these betrayals.”²⁸⁷ Another scholar writes that the “pronouncements on adultery were identified by accepting the following definition: adultery in ancient Israel referred to any coitus between a married or betrothed female and a male who was not married or betrothed to her. It is important to note that the extramarital intercourse of a married male is not taken into account by this definition of adultery.”²⁸⁸ At the same time, it is probably right to “assume that the inclusion of the commandment on adultery in the Decalogue presupposes a process in which the prohibition of adultery (quite common in the laws of the ancient Near East) was theologized and generalized (i.e., made to refer to other sexual transgressions or used as a part of stereotyped characterization).”²⁸⁹

On who exactly is being addressed in this commandment—whether men or women or both—Patrick Miller writes,

Although the primary or starting point of reference seems to be the activity of a man in violating the marriage of another man by having intercourse with his wife, in the trajectory of the commandment through the law and elsewhere, it does not stay so strictly confined. As with the commandments having to do with killing and stealing, one can identify a specific and confined focus that opens up rather quickly to a wider frame of reference. In this instance, there are two indicators of the wider applicability of the commandment. One is the formulation of the commandment itself. As others have noted the common expression for sexual intercourse is “lie with” (šākab) + preposition + object (“her,” “a woman,” and the like, e.g., Gen. 19:32-34; 39:7-14; Exod. 22:15). There are other expressions as well, such as “take” (her; e.g., Gen. 34:2; 38:2), and “come to/cohabit with” (her; e.g., Gen. 38:2, 15-16). All of these, however, regularly take an object, and it is female. The commandment itself uses a verb that is less common in these situations, nā’ap, “commit adultery.” It is a more general term and can stand without an object, thus leaving the possible object of the act of adultery open, relative to whether it is with a wife or a husband. Even when the verb nā’ap is used in an explicit drawing upon Decalogue language and reference, as in Leviticus 20:10, the subject is a man (’iš), and

²⁸⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 234.

²⁸⁷ John I. Durham, *Exodus, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 293.

²⁸⁸ Hendrik Bosman, “Adultery, Prophetic Tradition, and the Decalogue,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 267.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

the object is “the wife of his neighbor.” Here the specifying is a narrowing, but that is not the form of the commandment itself. One may well expect that a formulation on the order of Leviticus 20:10 was what was meant, but that is not what appears, and the difference is very noticeable. The formulation of the commandment is more general and more open.

This same verse in Leviticus 20, in a counterword to what has just been noted, happens to provide the other primary indicator that the commandment can and should be seen as addressing women as well as men. That is in the fact that the statute in Leviticus 20:10 prohibiting adultery says that the woman as well as the man shall be put to death. Both persons are seen as having violated the commandment/statute and are subject to its sanctions. Furthermore, both the man and the woman are called “adulterers” (the man, *nō’ēp*; the woman, *nō’āpet*). Both persons have clearly violated the commandment. Inclusion of the adulteress in the punishment may be a later development in light of the use of a singular verb.²⁹⁰

Douglas Stuart lists laws covering the implications of the adultery command: “Premarital sex and cohabitation without marriage are covered both directly and by implication in Exod 22:16-17; Lev 21:13-14; Deut 22:13-22. Incest is prohibited in Lev 18; 20:17-19. Bestiality is outlawed by Exod 22:19; Lev 18:23; 20:15-16; Deut 27:21. Widows and widowers could remarry under certain conditions but could not do so without restraint (Deut 22:30); having sex outside of marriage with a widow or widower would represent a type of exploitation encompassed by Exod 22:22-24; Lev 21:14; Deut 10:18; 24:17; 25:5-9; 27:19. All these laws would be interpreted by the usual required extrapolation from the paradigmatic statements themselves.”²⁹¹

Finally, Walter Kaiser offers the following summary on the command: “[The verb to ‘commit adultery’] can be used of either men or women. Since the punishment for adultery is death (Deut 22:22) while the penalty for the seduction of a virgin is an offer of marriage or money (Exod 22:16-17; Deut 22:23-29), adultery is distinguished from fornication in the OT. The sin of adultery is not just a question of violating another person’s property; it is also a moral question (see Gen 20:9, Abimelech’s narrow escape from ‘such great guilt’ [lit., ‘sin’], and Gen 39:9, a ‘sin against God’ as well as against Potiphar). . . . One of the best allegories on marital fidelity is found in Proverbs 5:15-21.”²⁹²

The Seventh Commandment in the OT

The seventh commandment is also found in identical form in Deuteronomy 5:18. On the command throughout the OT, John Durham writes the following:

The literal reference of the seventh commandment is shown by such passages as (1) Lev 18:20; 20:10; and Deut 22:22 to have been sexual intercourse of a man with the wife of another man; (2) Deut 22:23-27, sexual intercourse of a man with the fiancée of another man; and (3) Hos 4:13; Ezek 16:32, sexual intercourse of a wife with a man, probably a

²⁹⁰ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 273-74.

²⁹¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 464 n. 68.

²⁹² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 425.

married man . . . other than her husband. That the fiancée of a man was considered and treated insofar as sexual fidelity was concerned just as she would be when she became the man's wife is made clear by Deut 22:23-29.

That adultery was considered a serious breach of the covenant relationship with Yahweh is shown both by the bluntness of the references to it and by the severity of the penalties inflicted for it. Jeremiah (5:7) includes adultery along with the worship of "no-gods" and "bunching up at the whore house" among sins that make Yahweh's forgiveness difficult. Hosea (4:2) includes adultery with swearing a curse falsely, deceitful lying, killing ([rtsh], as in v 13), stealing ([gnb], as in v 15), destruction and piling one bloody deed onto another as a part of an inclusive charge against Israel (Hos 4-8). Job (24:13-17) lists the adulterer along with the murderous thief as a creature of the dark. The penalty for adultery was death, by stoning (usually, Deut 22:24) or by burning (Gen 38:24; Lev 20:14, 21:9), depending apparently upon the specific circumstances. Though a milder punishment was specified for other sexual offenses, as for example the seduction (Exod 22:16-17) or rape of a virgin (Deut 22:28-29), adultery, in any of the liaisons by which it was possible, was punishable by death.²⁹³

One scholar explains how "both the adulterer and the adulteress were subject to capital punishment (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:24 [stoning]; contrast Laws of Ur-Nammu §7, which exonerates the man if the woman initiates the adultery). An exception is the case of an inchoately married slave girl (Lev 19:20-22), where the girl is not executed because she was not free to refuse or the betrothal was not fully established by money, but the man was required to offer a guilt/reparation offering to God (implying also restitution to the master) for his offense. Execution for adultery depended upon several factors. The woman would escape culpability if she cried out, indicating that she was an unwilling participant (Deut 22:24; cf. Code of Hammurabi §130, Middle Assyrian Laws §A12), and she is given the benefit of the doubt if she is violated where no one could hear her cries (Deut 22:25-27). The requirement of two or three witnesses for capital cases (Deut 17:6-7) preclude most executions for sexual offenses, and divorce or ransoming rather than execution was probably an option Given the severity of the potential penalty, accusations of adultery were not to be made lightly [cf. Deut 22:13-21]."²⁹⁴

Such an attitude toward adultery is "fully understandable only in view of the fact that more than the integrity of marriage and the home and more than the integrity of personal honor were at stake in the covenantal setting of Yahweh's 'ten words.' The integrity of the Israelite's relationship with Yahweh himself was at stake. Everywhere in the ANE, Israel concluded, adultery was a crime against persons; but in Israel it was first of all and even more a crime against Yahweh (Gen 20:9; 39:9; Jer 3:1 . . .). Most telling of all in this connection is the use of adultery as a description of Israel's obsession with idolatry (Isa 57:1-13; Jer 3:6-9; Ezek 23:36-49, and all the references to Israel's 'great sin,' predominant among them Exod 32:21-34 . . .). Adultery with the husband or the wife or the betrothed of another was, like idol worship, a turning away from commitment to Yahweh."²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Durham, Exodus, 293-94.

²⁹⁴ J. M. Sprinkle, "Sexuality, Sexual Ethics," in Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2003), 745.

²⁹⁵ Durham, Exodus, 294.

The connection between adultery and the worship of other gods is found in many places in the OT. “Adultery, that is, sexual relationship that betrays the deepest covenantal relationship between two persons, is in both the background and the foreground of the Old Testament’s many manifestations of the First Commandment and what it involves. The marital metaphor is the closest relational metaphor in the human realm, and the sexual urge is so strong within human experience that it is not surprising that sexual language and marital images should come to the fore as a way of speaking about the relationship between God and human beings or, more specifically, Israel. While the image of adultery and marital betrayal is most prominent within the prophets, there are clear indications of its presence from the beginning of the story of the Lord and Israel.”²⁹⁶

Another scholar writes that “Yahweh is a jealous God, a God who takes revenge against other gods when they seek to embrace Israel, precisely as a husband is jealous when another man goes after his wife. Nor does Yahweh tolerate Israel herself going after those gods; for in so doing, Israel is committing adultery just like a woman who is being unfaithful to her own husband . . . His honor and love are being violated.”²⁹⁷ Below are some examples of God viewing Israel as an adulteress wife:

She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. (Jer 3:8)

How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of whores. (Jer 5:7)

Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings. (Ezek 16:32-33)

And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. (Ezek 16:38)

The entire book of Hosea deals with Israel as God’s faithless bride:

And the LORD said to me, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.” (3:1)

They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they play

²⁹⁶ Miller, Ten Commandments, 281.

²⁹⁷ Douma, Ten Commandments, 244.

the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin. Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty. (Hos 4:13-15)

The Seventh Commandment and the NT

In the NT, we find the command assumed in many places, and we also find the OT idea of unfaithfulness to God as adultery. Below are some examples of both:

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. (Matt 15:19)

An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. (Matt 16:4)

And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness.” (Matt 19:17-18)

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:38)

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” (Luke 18:11)

For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Rom 13:9)

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality. (1 Cor 6:9)

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. (Heb 13:4)

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (Jas 4:4)

They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! (2 Pet 2:14)

Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works. (Rev 2:22)

In addition to these, three other significant texts are worth singling out. First, in Matthew 5, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27-28). Miller explains that “this is not a break with the Commandments; it is a reinforcement of the direction opened up by the Tenth Commandment: lustful desire for another’s spouse already begins to undercut both the marriage of the one who so desires and that of the one is desired. The distinction between the desire and the act is clear, but the assumption that desire is acceptable is not. There are two reasons for that. One is already implicit in the coveting commandment, and that is the ease with which inordinate desire, lust, opens up into acting (cf. Prov. 6:27-28). The other is the close connection between mind and heart and one’s intimate relationship with another in marriage.”²⁹⁸

Second, coming on the heels of the text above in Matthew 5, we read Jesus’ words: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt 5:31-32). Here Jesus elevates the demand for marital faithfulness beyond what was currently being followed in his day, tying it back to God’s original intention in creation (Matt 19:8). Third is the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. This is a disputed text and probably does not belong in the place where we find it in John. At the same time, many hold it to be a genuine piece of Jesus tradition. The bottom line in the story is that the woman’s adultery does not ultimately condemn her before God. “The great sin is overcome by divine grace here imparted in the words of Jesus, who also calls the adulterous woman to a new life.”²⁹⁹

General Scholarly Comment

Terence E. Fretheim

The verb is used with both men and women as the subject and concerns those who are married and those who are betrothed (see Lev. 18:6-20; 20:10-21; Deut. 22:23-29). There is a double standard in the law’s treatment of men and women in this regard, however. Men commit adultery only with other married women, women with any other man. This reflects the patriarchal character of Israel’s society. Any contemporary use of the commandment would be compelled to treat men and women in the same terms, if it were to remain true to the inner-biblical warrant to update laws in view of changing perspectives and social circumstances.

The commandment had to do with adultery and the unfaithfulness which that entailed, not with fornication. At the same time, at least some forms of the latter were considered a moral offense (see 22:16-17; cf. Matt. 15:19; 1 Cor. 6:18) and may have been considered an extension of the commandment along with other sexual offenses (22:19; see Lev. 18:1-30). Any contemporary usage of the commandment should draw into its orbit of consideration other sexual activities in view of changed attitudes. The resolution of such issues is not often a clear-cut matter, however. Sexual harassment, rape, and pornography are certainly violence against the personhood of

²⁹⁸ Miller, Ten Commandments, 312.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 316.

another; they must not be considered of second-level importance just because they are not explicit in Israel's laws. Jesus' own extension of the command strikes at precisely this point (Matt. 5:27-28). Other matters, such as homosexuality or sex prior to marriage, are more complex. Once again such an assessment should occur fundamentally within a theology of creation, drawing on both biblical and nonbiblical resources.

This commandment insists that issues of sexuality are not a casual matter for the good order of God's world. From a positive perspective, this means a lively concern for healthy male/female relationships in all aspects of daily life. Respect, honor, and integrity should inform both attitude and behavior toward members of the opposite sex.³⁰⁰

Douglas K. Stuart

Other prohibitions of sexual immorality and regulations for sexual purity appear later in the covenant stipulations [e.g., Lev 18, 20; Deut 27:21], but the most important and basic of them is included in the Ten Words/Commandments: marital fidelity. No one is allowed to have sex with any married person except his or her spouse, and no married person is allowed to have sex with anyone other than his or her spouse.

Adultery was known in the ancient world as "the great sin." Marriage is foundational to the creation order and to human society; husbands and wives can hardly function fully as one flesh if they do not trust each other. Sexual relations are the virtual seal of a marriage covenant, and adultery betrays the emotional-psychological intimacy that specially connects adult men and women within marriage.

This commandment does not explicitly condemn premarital sex, postmarital sex (as by a widow or widower), cohabitation without formal marriage, bestiality, or incest, all of which are dealt with elsewhere in various ways; but by implication it certainly does condemn all those practices. These other forms of sex outside marriage are indeed violations of God's laws, but it is sex outside marriage involving married people that is especially threatening to basic family stability and thus receives special focus among the Ten Commandments. Again the principle of law as paradigmatic is essential for appreciating the implications of this command: reasonable and careful extrapolation from the paradigm of the adultery law yields the realization that all sex outside of marriage, whether before, during, after or instead of a person's actual legal marriage would be a violation of the divine covenant.

Likewise, the commandment against adultery does not explicitly outlaw polygamy, a practice that, in fact, is not outlawed in the Bible. It is tolerated in the Old Testament (Deut 21:15-17) and denigrated in the New Testament (1 Tim 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6) partly because ancient culture allowed it. Converts to Judaism or Christianity in the ancient world therefore often enough came from situations of polygamy, where a convert's divorcing all but one wife in order to achieve the desired monogamy would have represented an offense against marriage greater than polygamy. So polygamy was accordingly tolerated, but monogamy is everywhere in Scripture assumed as the ideal, as a creation ordinance (Gen 2:24) firmly reinforced by Jesus (Matt 19:5) and Paul (Eph 5:31).

³⁰⁰ Fretheim, Exodus, 234-35.

The commandment also argues, implicitly, against divorce. If marriage is so important that it must be protected against adulteration—even the sort of adulteration that might occur in brief interludes—it certainly is important enough to protect against dissolution altogether. Accordingly, divorce cannot be used as a mechanism to get around adultery (Deut 24:1-4; Jer 3:1), is condemned in the strongest divine terms in the Old Testament (Mal 2:16), and in Jesus’ teaching represents the equivalent of adultery in any situation except where adultery itself is the justifiable reason for divorce (Matt 5:32; 19:9 and par.).³⁰¹

J. A. Motyer

Genesis 5:1-2 finds the image of God reflected in the first man and woman united in marriage, who in their togetherness bear the name ‘man’ (Heb. ’ādām) with all that implies. It is for this reason that the offence of adultery disrupts and defiles the image of God. We ought also to recall that the Old Testament defines marriage as a covenant and even uses it as an illustration of the Lord’s covenant with his people. It is in this way that the seventh commandment, like all the others, reflects the divine nature, for at Sinai the Lord had pledged his covenanted word to his people. As Jeremiah insisted, he ‘was a husband to them’ (Jer. 31:32), that is, he was undeviating in faithfulness and committed to keep and do what he had undertaken. Marital infidelity involves going back on one’s pledged word and therefore is a departure from the image of God.³⁰²

Nahum Sarna

In a society in which polygamy but not polyandry is socially acceptable, the definition of adultery is sexual intercourse by mutual consent between a married woman and a man who is not her lawful husband. Such was the case throughout the ancient Near East. Adultery was a private wrong committed against the husband, an infringement of his exclusive rights of possession. Hence, the punishment or pardon of the violators was left to his discretion. True, adultery is termed “the great sin” in both Egypt and Ugarit, but the gods were not involved in its interdiction or in its legal consequences. In Israel, by contrast, the marriage bond has a sacral dimension, and the prohibition of adultery is divinely ordained. Since adultery is treated as both a public wrong and an offense against God, the husband has no legal power to pardon his faithless wife or her paramour. The gravity of adultery in Israelite law may be gauged both by its place in the Decalogue—between murder and theft—and by the extreme severity of the penalty.³⁰³

R. Alan Cole

The law allowed polygamy (perhaps a necessary social institution to secure the protection of unattached women), but it never allowed polyandry (the taking of several husbands simultaneously by one woman). For a man to have intercourse with another man’s wife was considered as heinous sin against God as well as man, long before the law, in patriarchal times (Gn. 39:9). Perhaps this command is connected with the ‘stealing’ and ‘coveting’ forbidden in the two commandments below, since the wife belonged to another. Perhaps this also explains one aspect that is most puzzling to us who live under the New Covenant: while men are never commended for intercourse with prostitutes, it is never forbidden in the law (although the Israelites are forbidden to allow their daughters to engage in this degrading practice, Lv. 19:29). Presumably this is not infringement of another man’s rights, as adultery was. It is clear

³⁰¹ Stuart, Exodus, 463-65.

³⁰² J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus, Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 228-29.

³⁰³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus, JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 114.

nevertheless (see Mt. 19:4-6) that monogamy was God's purpose for man in creation: and doubtless, like divorce, polygamy and even fornication were tolerated in Mosaic times because of the hardness of men's hearts (Mt. 19:8). In Christ, they become unthinkable (1 Cor. 6:15). So far from abrogating this commandment, Christ instead intensified it, for He included under 'adultery' much of what is not only tolerated but justified by our permissive society (Mt. 5:28). Similarly, He included angry thoughts under the prohibition of murder: the commandments are aimed at thought and motive, not merely deed.³⁰⁴

Peter Enns

Whereas the fifth commandment treats one vital human relationship, this commandment treats another, that between husband and wife. Yet even this is not as straightforward as it might seem at first blush. How did the ancient Israelites understand adultery? It seems that this sin is committed when and only when a married or betrothed woman is involved. A married or unmarried man who had sexual relations with an unmarried woman had not committed adultery, although this is not to say that there were no consequences of such actions (see Gen. 38; Judg. 16). In such cases, the man would normally be expected to marry the woman (see Ex. 22:16-17). If he already had a wife, he would acquire a second one, since polygamy is not prohibited in the Old Testament.

The focus of the command is physical adultery. True, Jesus later will reveal that the full implications of this commandment includes adultery in the mind, but that is not in view here. God wants the physical intimacy of the marriage bond to be maintained. To say that such a nonspiritual understanding of adultery minimizes the command is not justified, as anyone who has been harmed by adultery can attest. Maintaining the physical sanctity of marriage is a central element in the maintenance of social cohesion, which is not a small consideration in light of Israel's impending entrance into the land, but it is also an earthly symbol of the intimacy between God and his people. This is why failing to obey Yahweh is described as adultery in Hosea 1-3.³⁰⁵

Conclusion

In this verse, we are once again "given a commandment that presupposes the virtues related to the worship of a true God, membership in a community of virtue whereby we are given the resources not natural to ourselves, whereby we are enabled to live in peace with one another. As we have noted, learning to live in peace involves learning to name our lives as gifts, to receive new life as a gift. . . . Marriage is therefore seen by us as a gift that expands our lives, training us to be ready to receive children, even as we have received one another in marriage. Marriage, its promises, and the manner of life it entails, are the God-given means to avoid the self-deceit and violence that seem inherent to sex without promise."³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ R. Alan Cole, Exodus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 160.

³⁰⁵ Peter Enns, Exodus, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 422-23.

³⁰⁶ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 96.

EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 15

Overview—On Stealing

The eighth commandment prohibits stealing. Though this sin may seem of lesser significance than others in the list, its prohibition is essential to “guard the fellowship of the covenant community.”³⁰⁷ Simply put, “Stealing is taking something that does not belong to you without permission.”³⁰⁸ Thus, as Stuart explains, “legal possession and personal ownership of things are permitted implicitly by this commandment, which assumes that stealing is possible, something that would technically not be possible in a completely communal society. There are, of course, no completely communal societies; ownership of things exists in all families and neighborhoods and entire societies, no matter what their economic organizational structure. But with ownership comes responsibility, and respect for ownership is a responsibility in itself as well.”³⁰⁹

Textual Notes

The verb for “steal” in this verse is *tignob*, from the basic root *gnb*.³¹⁰ Several commentators mention kidnapping with reference to this word in the verse. John Durham explains the rationale behind this, writing that a number of scholars “have favored lengthening the eighth commandment by the addition of a direct object believed to have been omitted from the original form of the commandment in the interest of giving it a broader application. The scholar generally credited with this suggestion is Albrecht Alt . . . , though this interpretation appears to have been anticipated by rabbinic expositors, in both the Tannaitic midrash on Exodus . . . and also the Babylonian Talmud.”³¹¹ Alt wanted to “establish a clear difference between the eighth and the tenth commandments, to justify the inclusion of a commandment against stealing with commandments against such more serious offenses as killing and adultery by demonstrating a reference to stealing of a very special kind, and to establish a sequence of commands ‘protecting the God-given basic rights of each individual Israelite’—life (v 13), marriage (v 14), liberty (v 15), and reputation (v 16) To achieve these purposes, Alt proposed that the eighth commandment originally had an object, as does its verb [*gnb*] ‘steal’ in Exod 21:16 and Deut 24:7, and that it therefore prohibited, though not stealing in general, the kidnapping of a free Israelite man (on Alt’s interpretation . . . only the man was a nondependent, and so free; everyone else is provided for, in a list excluding the freeman, by the tenth commandment).”³¹²

³⁰⁷ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 160. J. A. Motyer writes, “The Decalogue does not go in for a ‘league table’ of sins – as is evident by the way in which it puts an offence against property alongside offences against life, marriage and truth” (*The Message of Exodus*, Bible Speaks Today [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005], 229).

³⁰⁸ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 465.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

³¹⁰ BDB has the simple definition “steal” (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001], 170).

³¹¹ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 294.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 294-95. Similarly, Cheryl B. Anderson writes that Alt “argued that coveting and stealing (‘taking’) are different stages of the same transgression, so that the difference between these commandments lies in the objects of the verbs, not in the verbs themselves” (“The Eighth Commandment: A Way to King’s ‘Beloved Community’?” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004], 284-85).

Patrick Miller also explains the logic on the subject:

The substantive word of the commandment, “steal,” (Heb.: *gānab*) means exactly what it suggests: to take from another and to do so by stealth, that is, under cover. There is an immediate problem, however, having to do with the implicit sanction or punishment for disobedience of this command. The other commandments are clearly identified as a kind of absolute law, for when we find forms of them in the Book of the Covenant or the Deuteronomic Code, they regularly are crimes for which the penalty is death. For example, Exodus 21:12 and 15:

Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death. (Sixth Commandment)

Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death. (Fifth Commandment; cf. Deut. 21:18-21)

Or with regard to the Sabbath Commandment, the one who profanes the Sabbath is to be put to death (Exod. 31:14; cf. Num. 15:32-36). The matter seems to be handled differently with regard to theft, however.

In the statutes of the Book of the Covenant, there are several cases in Exodus 22 that deal with theft of property—for example, theft of a work animal or a food animal. In each case, there is economic restitution by the thief, not capital punishment. The one other case where an act of stealing is involved—and the word for stealing is clearly used—follows the two cases cited above about striking a person or striking father or mother and, like them, prescribes the death penalty: “Whoever steals a person, whether that person has been sold or is still in possession, shall be put to death” (Exod. 21:16, my trans.). Deuteronomy reiterates this point in the only statute in the Deuteronomic Code that specifically refers to stealing: “If someone is caught stealing another Israelite, enslaving or selling the Israelite, then that thief shall die” (24:7, my trans.). The original force of the commandment, therefore, and still operative by its specification in the two related codes of law, is the freedom or protection of the individual, the theft of a person and the conversion of the “personal” good into property for economic exploitation. No member of the community shall appropriate any other member of the community illegally or against their will for economic gain or advantage.³¹³

Some scholars have followed the interpretation of the command as against kidnapping and others have not. Durham, for his part, writes that the word simply means “steal,” and if it “has any special connotation beyond this fundamental idea, it would be ‘surreptitious stealing’ (Judg 17:2-5; Prov 29:24), stealing under cover of darkness (Job 27:20) or confusion (2 Kgs 11:2) or even trust (Gen 31:19, 32). Such a sense of duplicity and of stealthiness cannot be said to fit the majority of the OT usages of [gnb], however, and so [gnb] is best defined as a verb depicting stealing of any kind to which the meaning ‘stealing in secret or by duplicity’ can also sometimes apply.”³¹⁴

³¹³ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 318-19.

³¹⁴ Durham, *Exodus*, 295.

Miller goes on to say that “the story of this commandment begins early in the Old Testament, when Joseph says from prison in Egypt: ‘I was stolen [gnb] out of the land of the Hebrews’ (Gen. 40:15). That story is revealing for the way in which it depicts the effects of stealing a person, what we commonly call kidnapping: the loss of home and family, enslavement in Egypt, subjection to imprisonment through the false accusations of his master’s wife. What is particularly noticeable in this story and in the laws that have to do with stealing persons is that stealing a person’s freedom is virtually always a matter of economics, the theft of a person for economic gain, turning the stolen object into a human machine of productivity. . . . Thus every attempt to enslave, to restrict the freedom, and to coerce and force economic production from one’s brother or neighbor—such is a violation of the Eighth Commandment.”³¹⁵ Furthermore, the absence of an object to the word “steal” in the command also “opens up the trajectory to include the prohibition against the covert act to rob a person of that one’s property as well as of his or her life. So the law develops a body of casuistic law that identifies all sorts of ways in which one might steal from another and prohibits them or requires restitution when the theft happens and the thief is caught.”³¹⁶

Below are some examples of how some other commentators have dealt with the issue. First, Nahum Sarna writes,

The precise application of this prohibition is complicated by the lack of specifics. The Hebrew verb g-n-v may cover theft of chattels and kidnapping. Rabbinic tradition interpreted the command according to the latter meaning. Many modern scholars do likewise, arguing that otherwise there would be an overlapping with the last commandment; that, in the context of the foregoing items, a capital offense rather than a tort is more likely; and that, in the kind of pastoral society that is presupposed in the Decalogue, the protection of individual property rights would not have played sufficiently significant a role to have warranted inclusion. These considerations are not entirely persuasive. The summaries of the Decalogue’s provisions found in Leviticus 19:11, Jeremiah 7:9, and Hosea 4:2 also fail to specify the category of theft that is intended. It would seem best, then, not to define this command so narrowly as to exclude from its scope the protection of property rights.³¹⁷

Walter Kaiser:

[Albrecht Alt] thought this command originally was alone directed solely against kidnapping and that it had been previously tied into the tenth commandment. But his distinctions cannot be sustained. This commandment recognizes that the Lord owns everything in heaven and earth (as Pss 24:1; 115:16 also claim), and only he can give it or

³¹⁵ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 320.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.* For more on the command, see also David Little, “Exodus 20:15, Thou Shalt Not Steal,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 399-405.

³¹⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 114.

take it away. Therefore no man must despotically enslave or kidnap his fellow man or usurp the rights to property he has not owned or been given.³¹⁸

R. Alan Cole:

Perhaps the original prohibition was mainly directed against kidnaping for slavery (see Joseph's experience in Gn. 37), but no doubt all sorts of theft are included. The covenant code makes details clear (e.g. Ex. 22:1-4), so no expansion is felt necessary here. In a peasant society where life is hard, any theft of property may lead to death, so theft is a very serious crime. There is a clear relation between this and the tenth commandment.³¹⁹

Finally, J. A. Motyer writes that there is a

'lack of specifics' following the prohibition of theft; the command 'simply transcends any conditions or circumstances', whether it is a matter of carrying off goods or kidnaping people and whether the thing stolen is valuable or trivial. In a word, Scripture respects private property and demands integrity over the whole range of personal, economic and commercial relationships.³²⁰

Thus, it is often conceded that kidnaping is likely included in the idea but that it should not be restricted to kidnaping: "The sharp distinction suggested by Alt between stealing a man and stealing his property cannot be easily sustained."³²¹ Furthermore, as Durham writes, one should be careful in trying too hard to connect the final six commandments to each other and using this as a basis for wanting to see a more severe command here (i.e., kidnaping as opposed to general stealing): "While it is clear that each of the commandments five through ten describes deeds breaching human relationship and therefore compromising the relationship with Yahweh that is the purpose of the entire Decalogue, perhaps too much has been made of the interconnectedness of the commandments themselves. What binds them together is not their supposed comprehensiveness or their listing of social problems of equal weight with equal penalties or their progressive development of the essential problems of organized society, but the fact that they are commanded by Yahweh as his ten principles for those who would live their lives in relationship, first of all, with him. These are the commands, according to Exodus, that Yahweh himself made 'in person' to Israel at Sinai. That is what gives the commandments their special place, and not the seriousness of the penalties inflicted when they were broken, or their place in a comprehensive legal system. Too much has been made of the relation of the ten commandments to other laws in the OT and beyond it. Not enough has been made of the way in which virtually all of the OT legal system is rooted in the ten commandments."³²²

He concludes, "The eighth commandment is best understood perhaps as a prohibition of stealing of any kind under any circumstances. We need look no further than our own experience of life to

³¹⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 425.

³¹⁹ Cole, Exodus, 160-61.

³²⁰ Motyer, Exodus, 229.

³²¹ Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 424.

³²² Durham, Exodus, 295.

know how disruptive of relationships stealing can be. But we must keep firmly in mind that Yahweh is represented as requiring that those in covenant relationship with him are not to steal. As with each of the commandments, the ultimate penalty for stealing is not the penalty of the community but the penalty of Yahweh. What Israel faces for breaking the commandments, as chaps. 32-34 so dramatically show, is not the loss of life, but the far worse loss of Yahweh's Presence."³²³

The Eighth Commandment in the OT

The eight commandment is found in several other places in the OT, including being "reinforced by a variety of individual laws on stealing in Exodus (22:1-16), Leviticus (Lev 6:2-5; 19:11, 13), and Deuteronomy (24:7)."³²⁴ This is because "stealing threatens the social order and causes pain to others by undermining the ability to possess with sure access things that are useful and needful. The food thief makes others go hungry; the work animal thief interrupts farming; the kidnapper tears apart a family; the clothing thief makes another suffer from the sun or the cold."³²⁵

Exodus 22:1-15 is a detailed treatment of theft and restitution. "In one instance the object of theft is 'money or goods' (v. 7). In most cases the object is an ox, a donkey, a sheep (vv. 1, 9, 10), or a coat (once: v. 9, 'clothing'). The reason for that repeated reference to animals is fairly obvious. These animals are the work and food and clothing animals, the means of economic support. . . . The concern for theft opens up more generally the matter of loss of property—loss again of the means of subsistence such as work and food and clothing animals but also grain in the field—whether by intention, as by theft, or by accident, such as livestock grazing or fire (vv. 5-6). The Eighth Commandment thus leads into the large area of restitution and restoration as well as the maintenance of justice and fair dealing. . . . A series of these statutes has to do with safekeeping and borrowing the goods of another (vv. 7-13). In other words, relation to a neighbor's property and possession is not just a matter of possible theft or accidental damage, but also the relationship of trust and . . . the 'social virtue' of readiness to help and to assist a neighbor, for example by loaning an animal to help in cultivation or by keeping something for someone who is away on a trip."³²⁶

A few places in Leviticus are also relevant:

If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbor in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbor or has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely—in any of all the things that people do and sin thereby—if he has sinned and has realized his guilt and will restore what he took by robbery or what he got by oppression or the deposit that was committed to him or the lost thing that he found or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Stuart, Exodus, 465.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Miller, Ten Commandments, 320-21.

shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt. (6:2-5)

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. (19:11)

You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. (19:13)

In Deuteronomy, the command is found in identical form in 5:18. Beyond this, “the part of Deuteronomy regarded by most interpreters as developing the commandment against stealing is 23:19-24:7, though not all the statutes in these verses seem to deal directly with its concerns. . . . The property concerns of this section are evident especially in 23:19-25 and 24:6-7. In the first of these blocks (23:19-20), the matter of loans is taken up, and the community is instructed not to profit off the situation of one’s neighbor, one’s brother or sister. Once again it is clear why the designation ‘brother’ (or ‘sister’) is a moral category and involves special responsibilities. While one might engage in commercial enterprises involving profit-making loans with someone outside the community (v. 19; cf. 15:6; 28:12), several texts make it clear that within the community, loans were made only to the poor, those in need of financial or economic support, and were for the benefit of the recipient, not the one who gave the loan (Deut. 24:10-13; Exod. 22:25). Such support of the needy by loans was expected but could not be taken advantage of.”³²⁷

In Deuteronomy 24:7, we find the “closest statute to the actual commandment against stealing . . . referring to stealing or kidnaping and selling a person.”³²⁸ This is followed in 24:10 and the subsequent verses by more laws on loans and treating the poor justly. Moving outside the law and into the narratives of the OT, some well-known theft stories include Jacob and Laban (Gen 30-31), Achan’s holding back things devoted to destruction (Josh 6:18-7:26), and Ahab and Jezebel seizing Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kgs 21).³²⁹

The Eighth Commandment in the NT

Moving forward in the Bible, we find that “this command against stealing is also reinforced repeatedly in the New Testament.”³³⁰ The Greek word often used is *kleptō*, “steal,” or *kleptēs*, “thief.” Some clear examples include the following:

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness.” (Matt 19:16-18; also parallel passages)

³²⁷ Ibid., 325.

³²⁸ Ibid., 327.

³²⁹ See *ibid.*, 332-35, for more on these.

³³⁰ Stuart, Exodus, 465.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

[Judas Iscariot] said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. (John 12:6)

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? (Rom 2:17-21)

For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Rom 13:9)

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-10)

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. (Eph 4:28)

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. (1 Pet 4:14-15)

In Titus 2:9-10 we find a different verb for stealing, *nophizō*, “pilfer, keep back for oneself”:

Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering [*nophizō*], but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. (Titus 2:9-10)

Interestingly, the only other place in the NT where this particular verb is found is in another notorious story of stealing, Ananias and Sapphira:

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself [*nophizō*] some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself [*nophizō*] part of the proceeds of the land?” (Acts 5:1-3)

Miller makes the observation that “with regard to the Eighth Commandment, what is most noticeable about the New Testament is the absence of the commandment per se from the Sermon on the Mount, even though other commandment concerns—such as murder, adultery, swearing

falsely, and talion—are taken up by Jesus. This seems to be because Jesus’ attention to the matter of property and possessions centers in teaching about the poor on the one hand and riches and wealth on the other more than specifically on theft in its various forms. The poor are much to the fore in the Beatitudes, especially the Lukan presentation, where those poor and hungry and weeping are extolled and promised blessing (the kingdom of God, sufficient food, and laughter), and those already rich, satiated, and laughing are pitied (Luke 6:20-26). Matthew (5:3) makes it clear that the poor and hungry may be religious as well as sociological categories: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’ Whether poverty is economic or spiritual in nature, throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks to the poor and announces good news to the poor. That is the heart of his ministry (Luke 4:18).”³³¹ Miller goes on to note how the rich young ruler “professes to have kept the Commandments, including the one prohibiting theft, and Jesus does not challenge this. Rather, he says there is another dimension to the property matter and that is (1) letting it go, and (2) providing from your riches for the poor.”³³² For Jesus, then, not stealing is beyond assumption, and we move into how to sacrifice for others things we already own.

Stealing, Social Justice, and Love of Neighbor

One other subject to mention on this commandment is that of social justice. Stealing can take many different forms and is not limited to things like petty theft and burglary. Throughout the law codes and the entire Bible is a concern for the poor and needy, who are most vulnerable to being taken advantage of, which constitutes another form of stealing. Along these lines, J. Douma discusses the idea of “land thievery,” which refers to “sins like acquiring acre upon acre (see Isa. 5:8), swindling the poor out of their meager possessions, embezzling and mismanaging public funds, expanding one’s territory unrighteously through war, and the like.”³³³ He goes on to write that in the early expositions of the Heidelberg Catechism “we hear especially those in power being reminded of the eighth commandment. Ordinary people commit petty thievery, but the stealing by political nobility on a grand scale, adorned as it is with splash and splendor, is still stealing. Compared to the kings of the earth, all others are but petty thieves. . . . Protesting against social injustice and large-scale theft did not begin with Karl Marx. We encounter sharp denunciations of these already in the time of the Reformation and thereafter. In his Large Catechism, Luther put it this way: ‘Yea, we might well let the lesser individual thieves alone if we could only arrest the great, powerful arch-thieves, with whom princes and rulers associate. They daily pillage not only a city or two, but all Germany.’ . . . The special attention devoted to the evil of ‘land thievery’ was entirely in line with the serious warnings that Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments, gives us about every form of exploitation and quest for power.”³³⁴

Thus, in seeking to understand the biblical teaching on stealing, it is important not only to think of simple theft of property but to move toward the idea of active love and concern for one’s neighbor. Miller highlights Deuteronomy 22:1-4:

³³¹ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 341.

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 290.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 290-91.

You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother. And if he does not live near you and you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall stay with you until your brother seeks it. Then you shall restore it to him. And you shall do the same with his donkey or with his garment, or with any lost thing of your brother's, which he loses and you find; you may not ignore it. You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again.

He writes that, in light of a passage like this, we can see that the “Eighth Commandment thus does not simply inhibit one from mugging a person on the street or robbing a bank—exceedingly important inhibitions but responses to the commandment that work in a more passive way. It also serves to effect a more systemic activity to ensure the economic sufficiency of one's neighbor, a systemic activity that is not even vulnerable to likes and dislikes, to favoritisms and antipathies, to hostilities and enmity between members of the community. One might call this the economics of the straying ox. The force of the commandment is not simply that if I, that is, the one addressed by the statute, steal the property of my neighbor, I have to make restitution. It is also that if I find my neighbor's ox straying, I cannot hide myself from the reality of my neighbor's economic endangerment. I have to take the ox in, watch over it, and protect it, making sure that the property is returned so that my compatriot is able to use this ox to provide for the needs of life. . . . The Eighth Commandment here carries forward into the creation of a communal disposition to watch for the economic endangerment of other members of the community and not to hide from it behind gated communities and the walling-off, literally or figuratively, of the ghettos of the economically endangered. Luther put it succinctly and well in his comment on this commandment:

We are commanded to promote and further our neighbor's interests, and when they suffer any want, we are to help, share, and lend to both friends and foes. (Luther, “Large Catechism,” in Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 419-20)”³³⁵

Finally, Hauerwas and Willimon are sharp in their critique of the church on this commandment, writing, “Given the desires that shape our lives, we moderns are more likely to view the commandment against adultery as the most onerous. That is a mistake. The most difficult commandments for us are these dealing with stealing and lying because they cut to the heart of the deceit upon which our lives are built. We simply do not want to acknowledge that we are caught up in systems that make it impossible to discover how deeply implicated we are in theft and lying. Just as lies are parasitic on the truth and known only by the willingness of some to speak the truth, so theft can be known only when there is an alternative to the presumption . . . that we are essentially self-seeking, self-interested creatures who will survive only if we get ‘ours.’ The church has failed in its responsibility to evangelize and to witness to a democratic, constitutionally formed world of self-interest that there is hell to pay for breaking the [eighth] commandment.”³³⁶

General Scholarly Comment

³³⁵ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 324.

³³⁶ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 107.

Terence E. Fretheim

While some commentators have suggested that this commandment focuses on kidnapping (see 21:16), it is likely that stealing of any sort is in view. Yet Israel understands property to be an extension of the “self” of its owner, so that theft of property is a violation of person, not just a person’s wealth (as anyone who has been the victim of burglary knows). Stealth may be a particular nuance of the verb, but stealing of any kind is no doubt included. Except for kidnapping, where the penalty is death, a fine or restitution is the punishment. Theft of property in Israel is considered a tort, that is, the injured party is restored so far as possible to the pre-theft position. As an apparent deterrent, “overcompensation” was called for in certain cases (22:1, 7, 9), though this would hardly have deterred the rich. This command is extended to include any form of dishonesty in Deut. 25:16.

Theft is an attack on the dignity of human beings and their work. God dignifies human beings by giving them work to do, from which they can expect to receive some of the fruits of their labor. This is central to God’s creational intentions for humankind (Gen. 2:15-16). Theft is a refusal to accept this, and hence the humanity of both the thief and the victim is diminished. Moreover, human beings make use of God-given gifts in and through their work. For the thief not to consider these gifts and the blessings they bring is to treat with disdain what God has given.

Within the larger context (e.g., 23:4-5), the positive side of this commandment is stressed in that each person (and by extension other societal structures, e.g., government) is responsible for the preservation and well-being of the property of the neighbor, even if that neighbor is an enemy. This commandment is not a basis, however, for the sanctity of private property as such or of particular economic systems. It does not forbid, say, structures that may stress communal ownership (see Acts 2:44-45). Basic to this understanding is that the people of God do not possess property because they have some natural right to do so but only by the grace of God (see Deut. 8:18).

These considerations raise profound issues regarding the affluence of modern society. The attachment to things, the extravagance in life-styles, and the mountains of waste generated, all in the face of incredibly widespread hunger and want, raise the question of theft to new levels. The prophets rail against Israel at precisely this point (see Isa. 3:16-26; Amos 8:4-6; Micah 3:1-3; James 5:1-6). At whose expense is this wealth gained? Does it not often constitute theft, for example inadequate wages or benefits? But at such remove that we will seldom know the victims’ names or have to look them in the eyes. New definitions of theft need to be considered in view of the complexities of modern society, not least its corporate and governmental structures.³³⁷

Peter Enns

This commandment is developed somewhat in chapters 21-22. Although the references to stealing are not exhaustive in these chapters, it does give us a framework from which to understand how the Israelites may have heard this command. Stealing includes kidnapping (21:16) in addition to taking animals (22:1, 12) and material things (22:7). Clearly the Israelites have some notion of ownership and rightful property for such a command to make sense.

³³⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 235-36.

Stealing from one's "neighbor," as with the seventh commandment, is a threat to society. It breeds distrust and strife. Little explanation is given perhaps because little is needed.³³⁸

Conclusion

The eighth commandment forbids taking things from one's neighbor that do not belong to you, including the idea of kidnapping one's neighbor (most likely to sell them into slavery for a profit). At the same time, the trajectory of the commandment throughout Scripture shows that we are called not merely to avoid breaking into people's houses and taking things, but to actively seek and sacrifice for the needs of others around us. If we are not growing in this, in the kingdom of God we really are no better than thieves.

NINTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20 : 16

Overview—Bearing False Witness

Commentators are in general agreement that the ninth commandment "involves first of all judicial or courtroom matters," even while the principle may be extended outside the

³³⁸ Peter Enns, Exodus, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 423.

courtroom.³³⁹ The command “seeks to assure a reliable, independent judiciary. As a whole, the Ten Commandments seek to bring every facet of social life under the aegis of YHWH and into the context of covenant. This ninth commandment concerns the court system and insists that evidence given in court must be honest and reliable and uncontaminated by interest. . . . It is clear that the notion of a court which gives reliable utterance is a continuing concern of the tradition of Moses. In Exod 18:13-23, offered as a Mosaic innovation, Moses is instructed to find reliable judicial officers:

You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain. (v. 21)

And in speaking of judges subsequently,

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue. (Deut 16:19-20)

The courts are seen to be crucial, because in social disputes that relate to political, economic matters, it is the capacity and responsibility of the court to determine, limit, and shape reality. And therefore if power and interest can intrude upon truth—by way of influence, manipulation, or bribe—then truth has no chance. It is reduced to power, and the powerless are then easily and predictably exploited.³⁴⁰

Thus, the command seeks to protect one’s neighbor and the community in general: “With the commandment against false witness, the covenantal requirements for living with one’s neighbor move from dominant concern for actions to an explicit focus on words and speaking. It would be a mistake, however, to see this movement as one from more serious matters to lesser concerns. Quite the contrary. The prohibition against bearing false witness is not so much a general rule against lying as it is a guard against the capacity of words and speaking to endanger one’s neighbor in various ways, or indeed, to bring about violation of the commandments that precede this one. Telling the truth is thus a neighbor matter. It is a form of the love of neighbor and a significant aspect of upholding communal relations. Safeguarding the neighbor by safeguarding truth is an inevitable sequence to the protection of the neighbor’s marriage, life, and property, for lying against a neighbor creates a domino effect undoing the other safeguards. Truth or consequences is indeed the choice in speaking about one’s neighbor.”³⁴¹

But despite its specificity, it is still true that the “ninth commandment calls for sanctity of truth in all areas of life, even though the vocabulary primarily reflects the legal process in Israel . . . to despise the truth was to despise God whose very being and character are truth.”³⁴² Another scholar also explains that a “compelling reason not to confine the commandment about false

³³⁹ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 313.

³⁴⁰ Walter Brueggemann, “Truth-Telling as Subversive Obedience,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 292-93.

³⁴¹ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 343.

³⁴² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 2*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 423.

witness to the court is that it is not so confined in our lives. Appearances in court are not discrete. As character witnesses testify, honesty is a character trait. Truth-telling is rooted in dispositions which form identity and lend coherence to life. . . . If the law as written is external to the self, it is also written on the heart, as our conscience bears witness.”³⁴³

Textual Notes

The text of the verse reads literally, “You shall not answer/testify [’nh] against your neighbor [re’a] as a false witness [’ed shaqer].”³⁴⁴ The language clearly evokes the courtroom as the context for the command:

The setting of the law court gives precise meaning to the four Hebrew words of this commandment. The verb “bear” refers to the responses of a witness. The noun “witness” is the evidence given as testimony. When the adjective “false” modifies this noun, it means untruthful. The witness is false because it is a lie. (A broader adjective, false in the sense of groundless or worthless, is used in Deut. 5:20.) “Neighbor” designates the covenant community, though only adult males testify in court. The form of the verb, a negative imperative in the second person singular, indicates that the command is addressed to individuals and prohibits lying in court as a matter of policy.³⁴⁵

Similarly, John Durham writes that the wording “connects it to the judicial process in the covenant community [’nh] means ‘answer, give reply, testify,’ especially when, as here, it is followed by [the Hebrew preposition meaning] ‘for, against, in the case of.’ The noun [re’a] ‘companion, neighbor, friend, fellow-citizen’ refers always in the OT to a person with whom one stands in a reciprocal relationship, and in legal contexts, to a fellow member of the covenant community [’ed] ‘testimony, evidence’ appears to be derived from [’wd] ‘do again, repeat,’ and refers to what amounts to a repeated account, an answer given as evidence. [shaqer], which qualifies the [’ed], means ‘lying, deceiving, false, fraudulent.’ [’ed shaqer] occurs in the OT in reference to a lying testimony in a judicial context in Deut 19:18; Ps 27:12; and Prov 6:19; 12:17 . . . ; 14:5; 19:5, 9 . . . ; and 25:18.”³⁴⁶

Douglas Stuart notes that “this is the first commandment to employ the *rēa* ‘neighbor,’ in its general juridical sense of ‘anyone else you happen to come in contact with’ rather than the more narrow sense of ‘someone living near you’ (cf. Exod 3:22; 11:2; 12:4). In laws and formal rules, neighbor has nothing to do with proximity or familiarity; your ‘neighbor’ connotes any other human being you may have dealings with, actually or potentially.”³⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann also writes that the command “brings into stark juxtaposition two terms that assure its covenantal intent: ‘neighbor—false.’ The prohibition is not simply against ‘false witnesses; it is a false

³⁴³ Charles M. Swezey, “Exodus 20:16—‘Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness Against Thy Neighbor,’” *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 410. For a treatment of whether it is sometimes necessary to lie and whether this breaks the commandment or not, see Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 324-31.

³⁴⁴ For the noun *shaqer*, BDB has “deception, disappointment, falsehood,” and for the verb *shaqer* it has “do or deal falsely” (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001], 1055).

³⁴⁵ Swezey, “Exodus 20:16,” 405.

³⁴⁶ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 296.

³⁴⁷ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, *New American Commentary*, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 466.

witness against your neighbor, that is, a fellow member of the covenant community. The horizon of the prohibition is the well-being of the neighbor and the enhancement of the neighborhood. More broadly, the prohibition concerning practices and conditions makes a neighborhood viable and genuinely human.³⁴⁸

The Ninth Commandment in the OT

The ninth commandment is also found in Deuteronomy 5:20, though the Hebrew word for “false” is different. Patrick Miller explains, “One aspect of translation that merits some attention is the fact that two different terms for ‘false’ are used in the two forms of the Decalogue. In Exodus 20:16, the noun *šeqr* occurs, meaning ‘falsehood, deception,’ the phrase ‘*‘ēd šeqr*’ literally meaning ‘a witness of falsehood.’ In the Deuteronomic form of the commandment, however, the word *šāw’* appears in the place of *šeqr*. *Šāw’* is the term used in the Third Commandment to describe the misuse of the name of God. The word is somewhat more complex in its usage than is *šeqr*. . . . It often refers to swearing falsely. Exodus 23:1 refers to a “*šāw’* report” in a juridical context where there are other references to court testimony. Other uses of this term, however, suggest the notion of something empty and without substance. As we have already suggested, the range of difference is narrow in this case. There is not much distinction between words that are false and words that are empty or worthless.”³⁴⁹ John Durham writes similarly, “In Deut 5:20, [shqr] is replaced by [shaw] ‘nothingness, emptiness, worthlessness, something vain,’ to form a phrase found only there and intended apparently to broaden the application of the ninth commandment to include any evasive or worthless testimony.”³⁵⁰

Looking at the broader OT teaching, the fact that the “whole matter of the responsibility of the individual Israelite for the integrity of the legal process was taken quite seriously in the covenant community of Israel is shown by a number of OT texts (e.g., Exod 23:1; Num 35:30; Jer 7:8; Ps 24:4; Prov 25:18; and Job 31:30). The testimony of at least two witnesses was required to sustain a charge (Deut 19:15; Num 35:30), and the penalty for false accusation was severe (Deut 19:16-21). In fact, there was even provision for punishing those who frustrated or defeated justice by refusing to come forward to give needed testimony. The ninth commandment provided an obvious and no doubt needed protection of the legal process at the crucial point where the evidence of wrongdoing within the covenant community was given.”³⁵¹

Miller explains that “Exodus 23:1-3 and 6-9 take up the issues about truthful testimony, with a piece of instruction about property issues in verses 4-5 that carries over from the preceding chapter. The opening verse clearly has the Ninth Commandment behind it or implicit in its formulation: ‘You shall not lift up an empty/false (*šāw’*) report’ (Exod. 23:1a, my trans.). In this brief sentence various things come together. The unusual expression ‘lift up an empty/false (*šāw’*) report’ echoes both the Third Commandment prohibiting the ‘lifting up’ of the name of God emptily (*šāw’*) and the Deuteronomic form of the Ninth Commandment forbidding testifying against one’s neighbor as a ‘false/empty (*šāw’*) witness.’ It is a general statement in which the community hears echoes of both of these commandments having to do with

³⁴⁸ Brueggemann, “Truth-Telling,” 292.

³⁴⁹ Miller, Ten Commandments, 344.

³⁵⁰ Durham, Exodus, 296.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

truthfulness and the seriousness of one's word. Yet as it leads directly into the more specific instructions about conduct in the court, the opening sentence connects any kind of misleading, empty, or clearly false report about another member of the community with truthfulness in the court. The primary context of the commandment against false testimony is from the beginning and in virtually all its references the administration of justice, but the starting point is a false or empty word, harmful or potentially so, uttered about a neighbor in the community even outside the court but most definitely inside the court."³⁵²

Moving into Deuteronomy, the interpreters "who have rightly seen the Deuteronomic Code as a development and elaboration of the particulars of the Commandments in concrete cases tend to agree that the section of the Code that does this for the commandment against false witness is 24:8-25:4."³⁵³ Similar to the command on stealing, in these verses the idea is largely about living truthfully and not taking advantage of the poor and marginal members of society through falsehood. Below are a few other relevant OT texts:

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. (Lev 19:16)

The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deut 17:7)

And set two worthless men opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, "You have cursed God and the king." Then take him out and stone him to death. (1 Kgs 21:10)

Furthermore, two well-known stories where false testimony plays an important role are that of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen 39) and Ahab taking Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21). And falsehood is also condemned throughout the wisdom and prophetic literature:

A false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers. (Prov 6:19)

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. (Jer 6:13-14)

When I would heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria; for they deal falsely; the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside. (Hos 7:1)

Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal 3:5)

³⁵² Miller, Ten Commandments, 347-48.

³⁵³ Ibid., 349. For a more detailed treatment of how these verses relate to the ninth commandment, see 353-61.

The Ninth Commandment and the NT

The word for “false witness” in the Greek of the LXX is pseudomartureō (pseudo-, “false,” martureō, “witness”). In the NT, the word is also used. For example,

For many bore false witness [pseudomartureō] against him, but their testimony did not agree. (Mark 14:56)

Throughout the NT in general we find the pseudo- root used in many places for lying and falsehood (we use pseudo- in English with the same idea). Some NT examples of lying and falsehood are below. First, Paul assures his readers several times that he is not lying:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit. (Rom 9:1)

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. (2 Cor 11:31)

In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! (Gal 1:20)

For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (1 Tim 2:7)

Some other examples include the following:

But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” (Acts 5:3-4)

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. (Eph 4:25)

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col 3:9-10)

Some key moments where a lie prevailed in the NT include Peter’s denial of Jesus, the false testimony given against Jesus before he was crucified, the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), and the false witnesses brought against Stephen before his execution (Acts 6:13). The opposite of lying, of course, is truthfulness, which is also a theme found throughout the NT. For example, the words of Jesus and James on oath-taking and the need for truthfulness in speech:

But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let

what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil. (Matt 5:34-37)

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. (Jas 5:12)

The Gospel of John also refers often to the truth (alētheia), with Jesus himself being the Truth:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (1:14)

You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. (5:33)

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (14:6)

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. (15:26)

Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” (18:37-38)

He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. (19:35)

A few other examples (among many) in the NT include the following:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (Rom 1:18)

But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. (Rom 2:8)

Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:8)

For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. (2 Cor 13:8)

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (Jas 1:18)

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

General Scholarly Comment

Terence E. Fretheim

The original focus of this commandment was on the giving of false testimony in legal proceedings (see 23:2). The penalties for such deception are severe (see Deut. 19:15-19), understandable in view of its insidious effects (see I Kings 21; Ps. 27:12). The concern would not simply be an attack on another individual, and the danger therein posed to a person's reputation (see at 20:7), but an undermining of the corporate structures of justice which so depend on truthfulness. At stake is justice for anyone who uses the judicial system.

The extension of the commandment to lying more generally (see Deut. 5:20; Lev. 19:16; Josh. 7:11; Hos. 4:2) takes place early and includes any deceptive, slanderous, idle, or empty talk about other persons (neighbor = anybody) that would undermine their reputation or otherwise cast them in a bad light. This would entail not only deliberate efforts to deceive but the more casual gossip and rumor that often damage the regard or esteem in which one is held. This recognizes a concern beyond that of individuals to the well-being of community so dependent on trustworthiness among its members. Jesus' extension of the meaning of this command in Matt. 5:33-37 is consonant with these developments internal to the Old Testament.

Positively, this commandment calls for a commitment to the truth in all of one's dealings. Even more, it calls everyone to use speech constructively, to so speak of others that their well-being is furthered and enhanced. The Epistle of James is particularly pointed regarding the importance of these matters for the public peace (3:1-18; 4:11-12). What is at stake here is the good order of God's creation.³⁵⁴

Douglas Stuart

This commandment is also reinforced in Lev 5:1 (where false testimony appears to include refusing to divulge pertinent information at a trial, thus creating a false impression of what the facts really are) and Deut 19:18. A decent society requires a reliable court system and court processes. Because crimes and disputes do occur, it must be the case that they can be adjudicated and the criminal behavior or unfairness thereby stopped. If witnesses in a trial, whether civil or criminal, do not tell the truth, it is extremely difficult for judges to render proper decisions. In other words, the court system of a nation depends on the honesty of its people.

... Does extrapolation from the paradigmatic principle of this law imply that dishonesty in general, not merely in court cases, is also forbidden? The answer must surely be yes, reasoning not merely from the general concept of paradigmatic law but from the way that stealing, false testimony, and dishonesty in general are linked together in Lev 19:11—not precisely in parallel to the way the eighth and ninth commandments occur together here in the Ten Words but in such a manner as to suggest that the concepts of false testimony and dishonesty per se overlap, just as common sense would imply.³⁵⁵

Peter Enns

³⁵⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 236-37.

³⁵⁵ Stuart, *Exodus*, 465-66.

Giving “false testimony” (‘ed šeqer) is explained, at least in part, in 23:1-2, 6-8, where the context is clearly legal. It refers not to lying in general but to bearing false testimony in court. Israelite justice depended on witnesses to a much larger extent than in modern times. Without surveillance cameras or DNA tests, establishing guilt or innocence depended on honest witnesses and their integrity. Some of these matters are elaborated in Deuteronomy. For example, a death sentence is so important it requires two or three unanimous witnesses (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). In addition, anyone who accuses another of murder must cast the first stone (17:7). If the accusation is “false,” the accuser bears the punishment the accused would have borne had the accusation been accurate. No frivolous lawsuits in ancient Israel!

As with the other commandments, the focus of this one is not solely on “personal morality” for the sake of being good. It is rather on how one’s behavior affects the health and well-being of the fledgling Israelite community as a whole. When people in a public setting are in a dispute over land or property and, in the course of seeking a fair and just resolution, the parties involved or witnesses intentionally distort the truth, perhaps for personal gain, social cohesion is threatened. God is preparing his people not just to be nice to each other. He is training them to be his people in Canaan, to be order amid chaos, to be a holy people and a kingdom of priests so that by looking at them, the nations will come to know the true God.³⁵⁶

J. A. Motyer

In a similar way, the ninth commandment, (lit.) ‘you shall not answer in the case of your fellow [as] a false witness’, has both private and public aspects. The primary reference may be to an answer under oath at a formal court hearing. In this case the thrust of the commandment is to treasure the integrity of the judicial system. Once again, however, we notice that the command is non-specific. On which side of the case is one envisaged as bearing witness, for the prosecution or the defence? Does the witness hold the accused innocent or guilty? Would a truthful word have unwanted side-effects and a small lie foreseeable benefits? No such considerations are relevant. Telling the truth in court is, of course, sacrosanct, but it would be hard to prove – or even imagine – that the more general notions of tale-bearing, innuendo and direct ‘character-assassination’ are not equally prohibited. In imitation of the ‘God, who does not lie’ (Tit. 1:2), his redeemed should be people of the truthful word.³⁵⁷

R. Alan Cole

Since, in a simple desert society, nearly all crimes were capital charges, successful ‘false witness’ would be equivalent to murder. To safeguard against it, a witness must also be the executioner (Dt. 17:7), so that he might incur blood-guiltiness if he was lying. False witnesses figure largely in the Old Testament (e.g. I Ki. 21:10), as in any land where extreme poverty exposes men to the temptation of bribery. No doubt the command could be generalized into the prohibition of tattling and tale-bearing (Lv. 19:16), particularly of untrue and unkind gossip which could damage one’s neighbour.³⁵⁸

Nahum Sarna

³⁵⁶ Peter Enns, Exodus, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 415.

³⁵⁷ J. A. Motyer, The Message of Exodus, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 230.

³⁵⁸ R. Alan Cole, Exodus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 161.

Each individual is here directly addressed as a potential witness in a juridical forum. This is not the same as “swearing falsely,” discussed above, for witnesses did not testify under oath in ancient Israel. The purpose of court procedure was to establish the truth, on which decisions could be based. The witnesses, whose testimony about the facts with which they were acquainted was always given orally, constituted the key factor in the judicial process. False evidence not only hindered the administration of justice in any particular case, but also undermined public confidence in the integrity of the judicial system—and thereby jeopardized the very stability of society. As a consequence, various measures were taken to discourage false testimony. Two witnesses were necessary in order for the evidence to be valid, and false witnesses were punished according to the principle of talion. That is, for their mendacious, damaging testimony, they would receive the same punishment that would have been meted out to the accused. Also, the witnesses themselves had to initiate the execution in cases involving capital punishment.³⁵⁹

Patrick Miller

The prohibitive form of the commandment is crucial because it points quite directly to the critical issue of truth and lies: how the well-being of others is affected by what one says about them. Like all the commandments, this one opens up to a wider frame of reference as it is explicated and illustrated, but its primary direction against lying that is harmful and destructive is clear from its negative formulation. Whatever needs to be said about telling the truth in general, the commandment’s concern, as always, is with the good of the neighbor. As one person has put it, the commandment has one eye on the truth and one eye on the neighbor.

The resonance of this commandment with the one protecting use of the divine name serves to create a particular emphasis on speaking the truth as a critical responsibility deeply affecting one’s relation to God and the well-being of community life. Truth-telling is thus not a general virtue so much as it is a necessity for maintaining harmonious relationships. It is one of the clearest manifestations of love of God and love of neighbor.³⁶⁰

John Durham

In addition to the obvious application of this commandment to the maintenance of justice in the covenant community, however, there is also a wider implication of the requirement of truthfulness, reflected not only in the broader statement of Deut 5:20 but also in the fact that the truthfulness in legal testimony is presented not as a requirement of a system of jurisprudence but as a requirement of Yahweh. This commandment, like all the others, describes what the life of the Israelite obedient to Yahweh’s expectation is to be like. That he is not to give a lying testimony in a legal proceeding is at the root of the ninth commandment, but the testimony the Israelite gives before the elders in the gate is not to be considered something separate from his witness under less formal circumstances.

. . . In his helpful review of the broader implications of the ninth commandment, [M. E. Andrew] has stressed the “emphasis on persons” (“you . . . your neighbor”; even “witness of falsehood” instead of “false witness”) by linking the commandment to a series of OT passages dealing with lying and deception and by stressing the “emptiness of falsehood” and the “positive, even violent and vindictive harm” it does, bringing “pointlessness and harm into . . . relationships with God

³⁵⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 114.

³⁶⁰ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 344-45.

and people. . . .”³⁶¹ The false witness was inimical to the relationship with Yahweh, upon which everything, including the very being of the Israelite, was dependent. The reputation of the neighbor was important, just as the Israelite’s own reputation of the neighbor was important, just as the Israelite’s own reputation was important, of course. But however important these reputations were within the community, they were important to Yahweh most of all, for these people, as his people, were to be his witness to the world.³⁶²

Conclusion

In our culture where lying and deception are considered good marketing and no one really knows who they can trust on anything, the ninth commandment is extremely relevant. As one scholar explains, “Falsehood is not just something which happens to be wrong but which does not matter much. Falsehood matters because people are really and adversely affected: that is, the relationships between people (and, the writers of the Old Testament would add, the relationships of people with God) are empty—because they are turned astray, bringing unfruitfulness, discord, and injury instead of the wholeness and enrichment which is necessary for full life. Falsehood, in the sense in which it is understood in the Old Testament, has to do with the indispensable relationships between people and with God It can thus be seen that the word ‘falsehood’ as it is used in the Old Testament is regarded as a most serious matter, for the reason that it brings pointlessness and harm into the relationships with God and people on which our lives are based.”³⁶³

Therefore, the church “must be a testimony that the truth is known by people who have learned how to trust one another through sharing goods, committing one another to lifelong fidelity, the practice of nonviolence, who do these things because they know they are creatures of a gracious God who would have them worship him in truth. Calvin observed that ‘whoever bears false witness against his neighbor kills him [because] he robs him and is guilty of whatever evil proceeds from his lie’ (Sermons, 205). The church, in its unfaithfulness and willingness to accommodate itself to the lies of the world, becomes unrecognizable as something other than the world, becomes unintelligible to the extent that it lives as if our God does not exist. . . . It is crucial that as Christians we learn simplicity of speech and life. Chastity of tongue is a great virtue. To speak the truth requires that we lead truthful lives. That is why truthfulness is a virtue that requires there be difference in how we live and what we say.”³⁶⁴

Re: Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17)

Introduction

³⁶¹ Here he cites M. E. Andrew, “Falsehood and Truth: An Amplified Sermon on Exodus 20:16,” *Interpretation* 17 (1963): 427-33.

³⁶² Durham, *Exodus*, 296-97.

³⁶³ Andrew, “Falsehood and Truth,” 431-32.

³⁶⁴ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 123-24.

The final commandment addresses coveting and the desires of the heart. In this verse, the “Ten Words given to guide the life of the community of faith take us into what seems to be, and in various ways is, new territory. At their close, the Commandments open up the large matter of desire and its repercussions, suggesting that it is not only exterior acts that need guidance and direction but also interior feelings, attitudes, and desires. There is some debate as to how much the commandment actually has in mind only feelings and not actions, but there can be no doubt that the realm of the heart and mind—how one feels and thinks about the neighbor and what is the neighbor’s—is much in view. Indeed, by its place at the end, the concern for desire and its control provides a climactic conclusion to the Commandments.”³⁶⁵ Thus, “here is a God who does not deal in the modern dichotomy between the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective, the personal and the communal. It is all of one piece. God is concerned with not only what we do, but also how we feel, what we desire—the things of the heart.”³⁶⁶

Textual Notes

Although some traditions, such as Roman Catholic and Lutheran, have divided this commandment according to the two phrases “you shall not” in the verse, this is only because of the need to come up with ten commandments after having combined the first and second commandments into one.³⁶⁷ To be sure, the “*form* of speaking (twice ‘You shall not . . .’) is indeed striking, but in itself not a compelling reason for concluding that these are two distinct commandments. This is one commandment—You shall not covet—and it does not make that much difference whether the list begins with your neighbor’s ‘house’ or his ‘wife,’ as the varied order in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 suggests.”³⁶⁸

Furthermore, this “conviction is strengthened by the way the New Testament quotes the tenth commandment. Paul says that he would not have known coveting if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’ (Rom. 7:7). Evidently this is but one commandment, seen also in Romans 13:9, where the following commandments are listed: “‘You shall not commit adultery,” “‘You shall not murder,” “‘You shall not steal,” “‘You shall not bear false witness,” “‘*You shall not covet*,” and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”” Clearly, ‘You shall not covet’ must be understood as one commandment, even though various aspects are enumerated in the subsequent text of the commandment.”³⁶⁹

Moving into the words of the text themselves, it is possible that the idea of not coveting one’s neighbor’s *house* is a comprehensive one, as “*bayit* (the Hebrew word for ‘house’) frequently has the inclusive meaning of ‘household.’ Thus everything else enumerated merely specifies that comprehensive term, as the final cover phrase (‘or anything that belongs to your neighbor’) also

³⁶⁵ Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 48.

³⁶⁶ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 129-30.

³⁶⁷ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 338.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 338-39.

indicates.”³⁷⁰ John Durham writes that “in accord with this broad application, [*bayit*] is used in its collective sense, in reference to the ‘neighbor’s’ entire family and his entire property, as for example in Gen 7:1 or Deut 11:6. LXX reverses the sequence of ‘house’ and ‘wife’ in the text of Exod 20:17, as also does [the Hebrew] in the parallel version of this commandment in Deut 5:21, thus making ‘house’ a more specific term and setting up a descending sequence from a man’s most valuable possession in the OT view, his wife (Prov 31:10-31), to his least valuable ones.”³⁷¹

Thus, because “everything that pertains to the neighbor is included in the object of coveting, the real task of exegesis is seen as determining the exact meaning of the action or attitude that is proscribed regarding that totality.”³⁷² In other words, scholars have largely directed their energies toward what exactly the word “covet” (*hamad*) means.³⁷³ When it is examined throughout its OT context, it does not appear to refer to greed or desire in themselves but rather “it focuses upon a specific object of desire, the sight of which stimulates the craving to possess it. However, because of an inherent ambiguity in the biblical usages of that Hebrew stem, the meaning of the present command has been a matter of dispute.”³⁷⁴ Brevard Childs explains the debate:

In 1927 J. Hermann . . . presented the thesis that the verb *hmd* (covet) does not denote simply an emotion, but in addition included the action which stems from the emotion. To the impulse of the will is added the necessity of a corresponding action. His strongest evidence seemed to be from such passages as Ex. 34.24 and Ps. 68.17 in which the emotion of desiring included the act of taking possession. Herrmann’s thesis received additional confirmation when it was accepted and further buttressed by Alt in 1949. Alt introduced a reading from the Karatepe inscriptions in which the verb *hāmad* expressed once again an emotion and a corresponding action. Herrmann’s thesis was widely accepted in Old Testament circles, particularly by Köhler and Stamm, and was only occasionally resisted (Procksch, Volz).

Within recent years this thesis has received a major attack from William Moran Moran’s chief argument was as follows: ‘The mere fact that a verb like *hāmad* occasionally clearly implies some act of seizure or the like, is not to be understood in the sense that such an act belongs to its proper denotation’ (p. 548). Moran supported this point in reference to *hāmad* by three lines of argument. First, he argued that there are cases in which the verb is not followed by a corresponding action (cf. Prov. 6.25). Secondly, he tried to demonstrate that the verb *hit’awweh* (desire), which is the parallel used in Deuteronomy (5.21), carries also the meaning of an emotion plus an action, which would destroy the suggested contrast between the two verbs. Thirdly, he argued

³⁷⁰ Marvin L. Chaney, “‘Coveting Your Neighbor’s House’ in Social Context,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 302-03.

³⁷¹ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 299.

³⁷² Chaney, “Coveting,” 303.

³⁷³ BDB defines it generally as “desire, take pleasure in” and, with reference to Exod 20:17, “in bad sense of inordinate, ungoverned, selfish desire” (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001], 326).

³⁷⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 114.

that almost all verbs of desiring in Semitic are related to subsequent action, but without influencing the denotation proper of the verb itself.³⁷⁵

In the end, Childs believes that “Moran has succeeded in eroding the sharp distinction” between “covet” (*hamad*) and “desire” (*hith’aww*), both of which are used in the command in Deuteronomy 5:21.³⁷⁶ This means that “coveting” is closer to simple “desire” and does not necessarily always imply acting on the desire, as other scholars have argued. At the same time, Childs still believes there is a distinction: “The emphasis of *ḥāmad* falls on an emotion which often leads to a commensurate action, whereas the focus of *hit’awweh* rests much more on the emotion itself.”³⁷⁷ Thus, there is a strong emotional component to *hamad*, even while it often connects to action: “The original command was directed to that desire which included, of course, those intrigues which led to acquiring the coveted object. The Deuteronomic substitution of the verb *hit’awweh* did not mark a qualitative difference of approach which had the effect of internalizing a previously action oriented commandment.”³⁷⁸

Nahum Sarna also considers the issue:

Action, not just a hidden mental state, is certainly implied in Exodus 34:24: “No one will covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD.” Yet a decidedly inward feeling is understood in Proverbs 6:25, literally, “Do not desire her beauty in your heart.” Further passages like Deuteronomy 7:25, Joshua 7:21, and Micah 2:2 indicate that *ḥ-m-d*, itself having a passive nuance, is of sufficient intensity to stimulate active measures to gratify the desire. The issue is further complicated by such questions as whether desire or its avoidance can be commanded or legislated, and whether there can be liability for mere intention or feeling. But this poses no greater difficulty than does the oft repeated command to love God, one’s neighbor, and the stranger, and not to abhor an Edomite or an Egyptian, or not to hate one’s brother in one’s heart. . . . It must be remembered that the Decalogue deals with the ideal. It does not concern itself with penalties, if any, to be imposed by a court of law.³⁷⁹

And Durham, after examining all the angles, concludes that *hamad*, “as a verb meaning ‘desire obsessively, covet or lust after for oneself’ and describing a mental and emotional process interior to a person’s being, was the deliberate and careful choice of a verb for the commandment that ends the ten words. Just as the first commandment, ‘You are not to have other gods,’ provides the foundation for covenantal relationship, so this tenth commandment, ‘You are not to desire for yourself. . . ,’ describes the foundation for the severance of covenantal relationship. [*Hamad*] is by choice a reference to an obsessive covetousness that could be the gateway to the violation of every other principle in the Decalogue.”³⁸⁰

³⁷⁵ Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 425-26. In this quote Childs refers to William Moran, “The Conclusion of the Decalogue (Ex 20,17 = Dt 5,21),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (1967): 543-54.

³⁷⁶ Childs, *Exodus*, 427.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Sarna, *Exodus*, 114-15.

³⁸⁰ Durham, *Exodus*, 298. See 297-98 for his full treatment of the verb.

The Tenth Commandment in the OT

The tenth commandment is also found in Deuteronomy 5:21, where, as already mentioned above, the wording is slightly different:

Deut 5:21 And you shall not covet [*hamad*] your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire [*hith 'aww*] your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Exod 20:17 You shall not covet [*hamad*] your neighbor's house; you shall not covet [*hamad*] your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Patrick Miller notes a few different themes related to coveting in the OT. *First*, the “lure of silver and gold is large in the biblical stories of coveting and taking. Sometimes it is the gold and silver of another, as in the account of Ben-Hadad's siege of Samaria and his ultimatum to King Ahab: ‘Your silver and gold are mine; your fairest wives and children also are mine’ (1 Kgs. 20:3). Wealth and beauty evoke avarice; the property and the wives of one king are coveted by another who is confident he has the power to take them. . . . Silver and gold also arouse a craving on the part of Achan, who covets the silver and gold of Jericho and takes it, hiding it among his own belongings rather than devoting it to the Lord (Josh. 7). Here we do not have an act against the neighbor, but we do see an inordinate desire for money or its equivalent that leads an otherwise loyal citizen to act in a way that isolates the commandment and sets the community in danger.”³⁸¹ The background for this is “Moses' instruction to the people in Deuteronomy, telling them to burn the images of the gods of the Canaanite nations when they have been conquered: ‘Do not covet the silver or the gold that is on them and take it for yourself, because you could be ensnared by it; for it is abhorrent to the LORD your God. Do not bring an abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be set apart for destruction like it’ (7:25-26).”³⁸²

Second, “in the biblical story *the human predicament begins with desire let loose and uncontrolled*. The beginnings of dangerous desire are in Eden; because of that, Eden is lost forever, and the human story becomes filled with pain and toil. The effecting moment in Genesis 3 is not simply the words of the wily serpent to the woman. The serpent's words prompt a further look on the part of the woman whom God created. As the narrative spells out in some detail, however, it is the desirability of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that leads to the couple's disobedience of the divine command. . . . The desirability of the fruit is so evident and in so many ways that the serpent's contribution seems relatively minor in the whole story and the original prohibition forgotten. Except that God created *all* of the trees ‘good for food’ and ‘pleasing to the sight’ (Gen. 2:9 NJPS). There is plenty in the garden, all that one can desire. Sufficiency, enjoyment, and delight are part of the life that God has provided for the man and woman. But when the serpent points out another characteristic of the tree in the middle, the woman ‘takes’ its fruit (cf. covet and take in Deut. 7:25; Josh. 7:21; Mic. 2:2; etc.). There is no

³⁸¹ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 399.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

neighbor here. Only a violation of the constraints of life in the garden, a violation due wholly to desire and its power to make one forget and ignore, in this case forget the divine command and ignore its consequences. The first act of disobedience is the couple's unrestrained craving. Desire out of control changes the human way in the world."³⁸³

Third, the “*chaotic and destructive outcome of unrestrained sexual desire*, what has been known classically as concupiscence, is evident in several stories. In all instances, someone sees an attractive person and desire takes over. So Potiphar's wife sees the ‘handsome and good-looking’ Joseph and desires him uncontrollably. Joseph's refusal to lie with her leads to her ‘lying’ and ultimately to Joseph's imprisonment by her husband (Gen. 39). David sees the ‘very beautiful’ Bathsheba, and his lust for Uriah's wife leads not only to his taking her and committing adultery and later murder but begins the downfall of his house by the judgment of God and the acts of others growing out of David's disobedience (2 Sam. 11-12). A piece of that is the account of Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13),” and one other story that “adds to the terrible picture of what happens when sexual desire runs wild” is the story of Shechem raping Dinah (Gen 34), where “the common good is once more torn apart by desire run wild, and violence is the final outcome.”³⁸⁴

In addition to these examples, the “force of the command not to covet may be reflected in any number of statutes in the legal codes, as others have noted. One thinks of statutes in the Book of the Covenant warning against abuse of widows, orphans, and the poor (Exod. 22:21-24), against exacting interest from the poor (22:25), requiring the return of the garment taken in pledge before nighttime (22:26-27), and returning the ox or donkey of one's enemy when it has wandered astray (23:4-5). Similarly, in the Deuteronomic Code one encounters inhibitions or barriers against coveting what belongs to one's neighbors in the statutes requiring that garments taken in pledge be restored quickly (24:10-13) and wages be paid promptly (24:14-15). Leaving the gleanings in the fields and vineyards for the widow and the orphan is also a counter to excessive desire (24:19-22), as is the whole sabbatical program for release of debts and debt servitude (Deut. 15). Even as the commandment against coveting interacts with and helps to safeguard and undergird the commandments leading up to it, so its statutory manifestations overlap with those that are associated with other commandments. They serve to set guards against excessive craving and taking, setting limits on the possibilities of the powerful to develop ways of taking the goods of the weak.”³⁸⁵

The Tenth Commandment in the NT

The word for “covet” in Hebrew (*hamad*) is translated in the LXX by the Greek *epithymeō*, “desire, long for, covet,” which is a word also found throughout the NT, along with the noun *epithymia*, “desire.” Below are some prominent examples with these words in boldface:

But the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the **desires** for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. (Mark 4:19)

³⁸³ Ibid., 400-01.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 401-02.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 402-03.

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's **desires**. (John 8:44)

I **coveted** no one's silver or gold or apparel. (Acts 20:33)

Therefore God gave them up in the **lusts** of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. (Rom 1:24)

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its **passions**. (Rom 6:12)

For the **desires** of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal 5:17)

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and **desires**. (Gal 5:24)

Among whom we all once lived in the **passions** of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph 2:3)

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own **desire**. Then **desire** when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (Jas 1:14-15)

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the **passions** of your former ignorance. (1 Pet 1:14)

For all that is in the world—the **desires** of the flesh and the **desires** of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. (1 John 2:16)

In connecting this command to the NT, Walter Kaiser writes how it “deals with man’s inner heart and shows that none of the previous nine commandments could be observed merely from an external or formal act. Every inner instinct that led up to the act itself was also included. The point is as Paul later told Timothy, ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain’ (1 Tim 6:6). Jesus also commented, ‘For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander’ (Matt 15:19). See also Romans 7:7-8 for the importance of the tenth commandment in the apostle Paul’s grappling with identifying sin by means of the law.”³⁸⁶

Miller also highlights three examples in the NT with reference to this command. (1) Jesus and the rich young man (Matt 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30): “Jesus’ word to the young man, to *go and sell all* he has and give the money to the poor and then come and ‘Follow me,’ joins together release from the grip of desire to have and the true object of uncontrolled, extravagant desire”; (2) Paul in Romans 7: “It is no accident that Paul’s specific illustration of

³⁸⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 2*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 425-26.

the power of sin to turn the law into a way to death is the commandment ‘You shall not covet.’ For it is precisely in the power of inordinate desire to take over one’s being that sin finds its way into the human condition. None of the other commandments could uncover what sin does as clearly as the last one’; (3) James 3:13-4:10, where we find that the “root of human conflict is found in the desire for what one does not have.”³⁸⁷

General Scholarly Comment

Terence E. Fretheim

Exodus and Deuteronomy interchange “house” and “wife,” for unknown reasons. It may be that Deuteronomy separated out “wife” into a separate commandment because it pertains only to men. The word “house” in Exodus may be inclusive of all that belonged to one’s neighbor, but inasmuch as the listed items are all living, it could have reference to material goods. The listing of people and animals could be considered a special commandment specifying that which is most valuable.

The basic interpretive problem is determining what *hamad* (“covet, lust after”) entails. It has been troublesome to many that this is the only commandment seemingly concerned with an offense of the heart/mind. Because possession is occasionally implicit in the verb itself (34:24; Ps. 68:17), it is not uncommon to conclude that coveting referred originally not simply to an impulse of the will but also to actions leading toward the possession of that which is coveted. Eventually it came to be used for subjective impulses (see Prov. 6:25). But no simple development in meaning seems likely. At best, it can be said that coveting often leads to action. The more explicitly subjective verb for desire, *’awah*, is used in Deut. 5:21 (cf. Amos 5:18; Jer. 17:16), but this may be nothing more than the choice of a synonym (the two verbs are used interchangeably for God’s desire of Zion in Ps. 68:17; 132:13-14).

Hence the commandment is probably solely concerned with attitudes of the heart/mind that subtly or not so subtly lead to the misuse of that which is not one’s own. It relates to the spirit of the individual that forms the interior ground of the violation of the other commandments. Without covetousness, disobedience of them would probably not occur This command reveals how demanding these words of God are. True obedience involves avoiding not only certain actions but also intentions or attitudes toward others in relationship, perhaps best captured in such words as envy or greed or lust. Covetousness has a way of breeding discontent and easily leads to abuse and crime; it is a basic source of social disorder and trouble in interpersonal relationships. It betrays a deep dissatisfaction with that which one has been given. This understanding approximates that of Jesus in Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28. Jesus’ “But I say unto you” is thus not a radical reinterpretation of the commandments at all but a drawing out their (perhaps neglected) meaning in terms of the coveting roots of all disobedience.

The force of this commandment for an affluent society has been stated well by Harrelson (p. 153): “Ours is an age in which the appetite for more and more seems almost impossible to assuage. We find it increasingly difficult to maintain any sense of balance regarding our use of food; gadgets for home, office, or auto; clothing; entertainments done in our behalf as we look

³⁸⁷ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 408-12.

on; or recreational goods and equipment.”³⁸⁸ We must learn how to make distinctions between desiring that which is wholesome and good and beneficial for both people and nature and that which only feeds a hunger for more than we need.

This commandment shows that the language of rule or regulation or even law for the commandments is not entirely appropriate. Coveting cannot be regulated or policed, let alone clearly observed. The language of instruction is more appropriate (see 24:12), the inculcation of an attitude of the mind/heart. It may also demonstrate the fundamentally Godward orientation of these materials. Only God can look upon the heart, can observe the presence or absence of obedience within the human spirit. In the commandments one has to do most basically with one’s relationship with God. Or, to put it in other terms, sin against one’s neighbor is not simply an interhuman matter. It involves God, and the passion with which God can respond is soon to be noted (22:21-27).³⁸⁹

Douglas Stuart

Coveting (*hmd*) is desiring—wanting or craving something. The commandment does not say “do not covet,” which would make no sense since much coveting is permissible or even commendable as long as the thing being coveted is something a person *should* desire and not something that already belongs to someone else exclusively (cf. e.g., coveting [desiring] something as perfectly proper as oak trees, Isa 1:29, or coveting [desiring] something as wonderfully proper as the Messiah, Isa 53:2; the verb is used of God’s own coveting [desiring] of Mount Zion in Ps 68:16). Therefore the commandment is necessarily worded with objects for the verb “covet,” these objects being things that one should not desire because they already belong to someone else. “House” can as easily be translated “family and property”; other objects forbidden to covet are someone else’s spouse, servants, animals, or “anything that belongs to your neighbor.” Although some traditions have separated this commandment into two (coveting a neighbor’s “house” as separate from coveting a neighbor’s wife), there appears to be no cogent reason for this division. The entire verse is a prohibition against any sort of coveting of what someone else already rightfully has, with enough examples given as to leave no doubt that nothing properly owned by someone else can be coveted. Again the principle of paradigmatic law applies: from the list any reasonable person can extrapolate to all other instances of things that cannot be coveted. This commandment, like the prohibition against stealing, implies that God allows people to own things that belong to them and not to others.

Although it may seem to be belaboring the obvious to say so, the final commandment insists that God’s covenant people realize that wishing to have good and proper things is good but that wishing to have the wrong things is bad. What people wish for has a major role to play in what kind of society they will create. People able to curtail their wishing, so that it is limited to things they *should* desire, are people who contribute good to a society; those who want what they cannot properly have undermine a society; those who want what they cannot properly have undermine a society’s moral fiber. The commandment has no penalty attached; improper coveting is hardly enforceable by human beings. God here calls for his people to take an approach to their neighbors that respects them and their possessions—an approach they must

³⁸⁸ Here he quotes W. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights*. Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 153.

³⁸⁹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 237-39.

voluntarily agree to if they want to please him. Coveting is the starting point of stealing (forbidden by the eighth commandment) and, in the case of coveting someone else's spouse, adultery (the seventh commandment).³⁹⁰

Peter Enns

The last commandment is the only one that seems to be restricted to the heart rather than to actions. Coveting (*hamad*) refers to an inward desire that, if fanned, will lead to action. Still, the command is concrete, not abstract. In driving home the importance of this command, the Israelite is taken on a tour of his surroundings. Look around you: your neighbor's wife, his servants, his animals—in fact, anything that belongs to him. Coveting his wife will lead to adultery and the breaking of the seventh commandment. Coveting his servants, animals, or other property will lead to breaking the eighth commandment. In this sense, the tenth commandment may be thought of as a “summary commandment.”

It is perhaps worth pointing out that the command concerning one's neighbor's wife is specific. The command is not given in the reverse, since this specific sin is committed only when a married woman is involved It stands to reason, in the original context of this commandment, that desiring an unmarried woman (i.e., one who does not “belong” to a man) is not coveting. Moreover, the command does not address a woman, married or unmarried, desiring the husband of another woman. This is not to say that the Bible condones such behavior, only that such behavior is not treated in the Ten Commandments. They have not been designed to address the full scope of human actions.

It is again worth pointing out that the precise manner in which this desire is manifest is not made clear. How does one monitor whether one is coveting? What has to “happen” in order for the commandment to be broken? Is there a public dimension that might make the matter more open to general scrutiny? Or is this essentially a private matter? If answers to these and other questions were available, much less would be written on the subject.

What seems to me to be of great help in understanding the original purpose of the Ten Commandments is their function in the community. These are commands given by a saving God to a recently saved people for whom he has a national purpose. In this sense, the traditional twofold division of the commands—the first four directed toward God and the last six toward the community—can be justified, at least in part. As God's people, his special possession, the Israelites must know what he requires of them. Being an Israelite is not a matter of private, personal piety. It has vertical and horizontal dimensions, and obedience to God is required on both fronts. After all, if Israelites cannot behave properly toward their God and cannot treat each other as “special people,” as God treats them, how can they ever be a light to the Gentiles? How can they ever be a kingdom of priests in a world that does not know the true God?³⁹¹

J. A. Motyer

The tenth commandment is where the Decalogue ends, but it is, in fact, the point at which every breach of the law begins – when by our ‘own evil desire’ we are ‘dragged away and enticed’ (Jas 1:14). King David violated the sixth and seventh commandments (2 Sam. 12:9), but his sin began

³⁹⁰ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 466-67.

³⁹¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 424-25.

with the lust prohibited by the tenth (2 Sam. 11:2): possibly he could not have helped seeing Bathsheba, but he could have helped looking! King Ahab (more than ably assisted by his wife Jezebel) sinned comprehensively against the sixth, eighth and ninth commandments (1 Kgs 21:1-16), but the root of the evil was in his covetousness (vv. 1-4). ‘Improper desire’, says Murphy, ‘is the root of all evil. It can seldom be reached by human legislation, but it is open to the Searcher of hearts. The intent is that which, in the last resort, determines the moral character of the act. This last “word” is, therefore, the interpreting clause of the whole Decalogue (Rom. vii. 7).’

We should note that, unlike the case of commandments six to nine, the verb *covet* is here provided with a wide selection of possible objects and, indeed, is itself repeated. The intention is not to limit the scope of the commandment to these precise objects, but by heaping one possible object of coveting on another to drive home the seriousness of the sin of covetousness itself. Its target is, specifically and comprehensively, the contemplative sin – as is made all too clear by the way in which Jesus drew out its meaning and significance in Matthew 5:21-30. It is true, as Cole points out, that Exodus 20:6 binds together feeling and action, but it is the function of the final commandment to make explicit the internalizing of the whole law and the dire reality of sin in the heart.³⁹²

R. Alan Cole

Hebrew *hāmad*, ‘desire’, is in itself a neutral word. It is only when misdirected to that which belongs to another that such ‘desire’ becomes wrong. It is sometimes claimed that this is the only one of the ten commandments which prohibits an attitude of mind rather than an outward act: but to make this distinction is probably to misunderstand Hebrew thought. As in the case of ‘loving’ and ‘hating’, ‘desiring’ is an activity, almost equivalent to ‘seeking to acquire’. This same identification can be seen in the behaviour of young children. *House* means ‘household’, in the early sense of the word, and the thought of ‘wife’ is primary. This is made explicit in Deuteronomy 5:21, where the wife is named first. *Ox* and *ass* are the typical wealth of the bronze-age peasant or semi-nomad, for whom the perplexities of developed society have not yet arisen. ‘Slaves’ are the only other form of movable property. Ultimately to desire, and to try to obtain, the property of another is to be dissatisfied with what God has given, and thus to show lack of faith in His love. Further, the envy which this encourages will lead sooner or later to the hurt of one’s neighbour, and this is inconsistent with the primary duty of love.³⁹³

Conclusion

In examining the Hebrew word for “covet,” it is clear that we should use caution in separating too neatly inner attitude from outward action. The word often leads to an acting on the covetous desire. At the same time, the commandment still highlights inner desire, which is a stepping stone to breaking any of the other commands. “Before Ahab’s obsessive desire for Naboth’s vineyard was satisfied, the ninth and tenth had been broken (1 Kgs 21). Before David’s lust for Bathsheba was sated, the seventh, eight [*sic*], and sixth commandments were broken (2 Sam 11-12). The coveting merchants of Amos’s day broke the fourth and the eighth commandments in

³⁹² J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2005), 230.

³⁹³ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1973), 161.

their fever to possess (Amos 8:4-6). The citizens of Judah in Jeremiah's time, deifying their desires and longing after a material and local security, violated the first, third, sixth, seventh, and ninth commandments, and above all, by making Yahweh's temple into a fetish, the second commandment as well (Jer 7:1-15). And the son whose determined desire for his own way led him to strike (Exod 21:15) or abuse (Exod 21:17) his father or his mother was guilty of breaking the fifth commandment.³⁹⁴ Therefore, the tenth commandment "functions as a kind of summary commandment, the violation of which is a first step that can lead to the violation of any one or all the rest of the commandments. As such, it is necessarily all-embracing and descriptive of an attitude rather than a deed. It was perhaps set last in the Decalogue precisely because of this uniquely comprehensive application."³⁹⁵ In the end, as one scholar writes, "our problem as humans is not that we are full of desire, aflame with unfulfillment. Our problem is that we long for that which is unfulfilling."³⁹⁶ In light of this, the commandment is laid down to protect God's people from themselves.

³⁹⁴ Durham, *Exodus*, 298.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 298-99.

³⁹⁶ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Ten Commandments*, 130.