

# INTRODUCING THE DECALOGUE

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## Overview

- A. Name of the Decalogue
- B. Location of the Decalogue
- C. Enumeration of the Decalogue
- D. Structure of the Decalogue
- E. Function of the Decalogue
- F. Variations of the Decalogue
- G. Pessimism of the Decalogue
- H. Old Testament Citations of the Decalogue
- I. New Testament Citations of the Decalogue
- J. Abiding Value of the Decalogue
- K. A Concluding Thought

## A. Name of the Decalogue

1. The first collection of laws encountered in the Old Testament is commonly called the Ten Commandments.<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew expression עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים literally means “the ten words” (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13, 10:4). That is why scholars often refer to the collection as the Decalogue, which comes from the Greek phrase meaning “ten words.” It is appropriate for the Bible’s label for this section of Scripture to be the church’s label as well.
2. Nevertheless, each of the “ten words” is rightly considered a “commandment” (הַצְּוֵי, ἐντολή) because it is so called in Exodus 20:6, Matthew 19:17, Ephesians 6:2, etc. Also, the Decalogue is specifically called “law” (הַתּוֹרָה, νόμος) in Exodus 24:12 and James 2:8-13.

## B. Location of the Decalogue

1. The Decalogue as a unit is featured prominently three times in the Pentateuch. The first time is in Exodus 20:1-17.
  - a. The literary center of the Pentateuch is the unit containing the giving of the law at Sinai (Exod 19:3-Num 10:10).<sup>2</sup> The Decalogue is the first collection of laws in this unit, thus introducing Israel’s law corpus and highlighting its importance.

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<sup>1</sup>While the Decalogue is the first *collection* of laws encountered in the Old Testament, it is important to note that several pre-Sinai regulations were also given to the descendants of Abraham: circumcision of males as the sign in flesh of the covenant (Gen 17:9-14); the month of the Abib (March/April) as the first month of the year (Exod 12:2); the celebration of Passover (Exod 12:3-14, 21-27); the celebration of Unleavened Bread (Exod 12:15-20, 13:3-10); and the consecration of every firstborn son and firstborn male animal (Exod 13:1-2, 11-16). Furthermore, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. has identified specific people and events from Genesis that keep, violate, or somehow parallel each of the Ten Commandments, suggesting that these laws were written on the heart before they were written on stone. See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 82. Finally—and quite significantly—God on one occasion declared that he was pleased with Abraham because he “obeyed my voice and kept my charge, *my commandments, my statutes, and my laws*” (Gen 26:5, emphasis mine). God’s description of the patriarch here suggests the existence of other pre-Sinai regulations that had been revealed to Abraham but remain unrecorded in the canon. The text of Genesis 26:5 might also imply that divine law was part of the natural outworking of the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3), not an interruption or an interlude to it. As Paul exclaims, “Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not!” (Gal 3:21).

<sup>2</sup>See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 101.

- b. The events narrated in the Pentateuch cover 2,706 years.<sup>3</sup> Only eleven months of these three millennia are spent at Sinai, yet this material takes up a third of the Pentateuch,<sup>4</sup> again highlighting its importance.
2. The Decalogue is repeated in Deuteronomy 5:6-21.
  - a. There it is used homiletically by Moses to remind the Israelites—who are on the verge of entering the Promised Land—of their covenantal identity and ethical responsibilities before God.
  - b. Both the form and the content of this “second Decalogue” are very similar to the material found in Exodus 20, with several minor variations as noted below in Section F of this study.
3. Finally, Exodus 34:1-28 refers to the Decalogue. After Moses smashes the stone tablets of the Decalogue in a symbolic gesture of Israel’s breaking covenant (Exod 32:19), God rewrites the Decalogue on new tablets that Moses had made (Exod 34:1, 27-28).
  - a. Curiously, various laws *beyond* the Decalogue are also enumerated in God’s speech to Moses in this passage. There is no need, however, to classify this collection as the “Ritual Decalogue” over against the “Ethical Decalogue” of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, contra Wellhausen, et al.<sup>5</sup>
  - b. There are more than ten laws cited, so the entire list cannot rightly be called a Decalogue. According to Exodus 34:28b, God “wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.” Therefore, these tablets would have contained the same material found in Exodus 20:2-17.
  - c. Also, God’s speech to Moses may simply represent an oral summary of the types of laws that eventually will be found throughout the rest of the corpus. The passage nowhere demands that the oral version precisely match the written version. Claiming that it does is argumentative.
4. It may also be significant to note that most of the Ten Commandments are repeated among the holiness laws of Leviticus 19:1-Numbers 10:10, though the complete collection is nowhere enumerated again in the order given at Sinai.

### C. Enumeration of the Decalogue

1. The laws of the Decalogue are typically enumerated in one of three ways. Jewish tradition treats the laws prohibiting the worship of other gods and the use of idols as a single commandment. This tradition retains the number ten by regarding the opening line, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2) as the first commandment. The logic behind this particular arrangement is tenable, but it renders the “first word” (Exod 20:2) as declarative when the rest of the “words” in the collection are imperative.

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<sup>3</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 33.

<sup>4</sup>Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 184.

<sup>5</sup>As cited in Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, 193.

2. Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions treat the laws prohibiting the worship of other gods and the use of idols as a single commandment. These traditions retain the number ten by dividing the prohibition against coveting into two distinct commandments, separating the coveting of a neighbor's house from the coveting of a neighbor's wife, servants, and livestock. The logic behind this arrangement is not compelling because the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 5:21 reorders the items not to be coveted, such that Commandments 9 and 10 would have to be reversed for the two versions to match. This seems strained and unnecessary.
3. Reformed, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions treat the laws prohibiting the worship of other gods and the use of idols as two commandments. These traditions retain the number ten by treating the prohibition against coveting as a single commandment. The strength of this arrangement depends on an explanation for splitting the first two commandments.

Biblical Text	Jewish	Catholic	Lutheran	Reformed
<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words, saying, <sup>2</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."	1	1	Preamble	Preamble
<sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me."	2	1	1	1
<sup>4</sup> "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. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."	2	1	(1)	2
<sup>7</sup> "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."	3	2	2	3
<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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."	4	3	3	4
<sup>12</sup> "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."	5	4	4	5
<sup>13</sup> "You shall not murder."	6	5	5	6
<sup>14</sup> "You shall not commit adultery."	7	6	6	7
<sup>15</sup> "You shall not steal."	8	7	7	8
<sup>16</sup> "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."	9	8	8	9
<sup>17a</sup> "You shall not covet your neighbor's house . . ."	10	10	9	10
<sup>17b</sup> ". . . you shall not covet your neighbor's wife . . ."	10	9	10	10
<sup>17c</sup> ". . . or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."	10	10	10	10

#### D. Structure of the Decalogue

1. Some scholars divide the Decalogue in half, with Commandments 1-5 forming the first table, and Commandments 6-10 forming the second table. They contend that the first table is primarily for

Israel's application, and the second table has a more universal applicability. They note that the phrase "the LORD your God" appears in the first five commandments but not the second five.

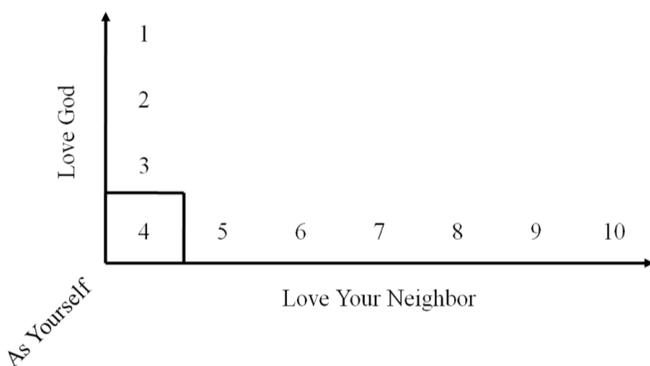
2. Other scholars divide the law *almost* in half, with Commandments 1-4 outlining the individual's responsibilities to God, and Commandments 5-10 outlining the individual's responsibilities to his fellow man. They contend that the first four commandments have a decidedly vertical orientation, and the last six have a decidedly horizontal orientation.
3. Following the grammatical analysis of John J. Owens, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. gives the Decalogue a tripartite division:
  - a. Commandments 1-3 describe right relations with God.
  - b. Commandment 4 describes right relations with work.
  - c. Commandments 5-10 describe right relations with society.<sup>6</sup>
4. The grammar on which Kaiser's outline is built is Owens' observation that there are only three positive statements in the Decalogue, all of which lack a finite verb. Legitimate translations of these statements would be:
  - a. "I *being* the LORD your God . . ." (Exod 20:2)—therefore observe: Commandments 1-3.
  - b. "*Remembering* the Sabbath day . . ." (Exod 20:8)—therefore, observe: Commandment 4.
  - c. "*Honoring* your Father and mother . . ." (Exod 20:12)—therefore observe: Commandments 5-10.<sup>7</sup>
5. This unique arrangement has interpretational validity, but I would propose a modification to sharpen it a bit further. The fourth commandment is about much more than "right relations with work." It is, in fact, a multi-dimensional law.
  - a. The fourth commandment is *cultic (religious)* in that "the seventh day is a Sabbath *to* the LORD your God" (Exod 20:10a, emphasis mine). It is also "blessed" and made "holy" (Exod 20:11). This religious dimension gives the fourth commandment a certain affinity with the first three commandments of the Decalogue.
  - b. The fourth commandment is also *social* in that the Sabbath is to be extended to "your *son*, or your *daughter*, your *male servant*, or your *female servant*, or your *livestock*, or the *sojourner* who is within your gates" (Exod 20:10c, emphasis mine). This social dimension gives the fourth commandment a certain affinity with the last six commandments of the Decalogue.
  - c. Finally, the fourth commandment is *personal* in that on the Sabbath, "*you* shall not do any work" (Exod 20:10b, emphasis mine). Keeping it would be a form of self-love or self-care, which is not necessarily always contrary to Scripture (cf. Eph 5:28-29). As Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). It is God's gift to humanity.

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<sup>6</sup>Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 84.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

6. The fourth commandment, then, appears to be a pivot point in the Decalogue. Herbert M. Wolf calls it “somewhat transitional.”<sup>8</sup> More precisely, it can be considered a Janus text. It looks *backward* to the first three commandments in its cultic dimension. It looks *forward* to the final six commandments in its social dimension. And it *stands on its own* in its personal dimension. Therefore, the structure I have adopted for the Decalogue is as follows:
- a. Commandments 1-3 focus on loving God.
  - b. Commandments 5-10 focus on loving one’s neighbor.
  - c. Commandment 4 focuses on loving God, loving one’s neighbor, and loving oneself.



Quite significantly, this structure corresponds to Jesus’ summary statement of the entire law (Matt 22:37-40; Luke 10:26-28). “The intent of the commandments is to engender love of God and of neighbor.”<sup>9</sup>

7. Regardless of which specific structure is adopted for the Decalogue, nearly all agree that the vertical (religious) laws are followed by the horizontal (social) laws.
8. “The image of God in humanity requires devotion and loyalty to God, and living in society with others who are in the image of God requires respect and love. The Ten Words begin with ‘I am Yahweh your God’ and end with ‘your neighbor’ (20:2a, 17d).”<sup>10</sup> This observation is true in the Hebrew text as well as in the English text: אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ (Exod 20:2a) and לְרֵעֶךָ (Exod 20:7d). Indeed, the form of the Decalogue serves a valuable function.
9. “The Decalogue is cast in a form that is easily committed to memory and preserved in the hearts and minds of the people. The fundamental principles of covenant relationship are reduced to ten, presumably for catechetical or pedagogical reasons, one principle for each finger. This was the kind of document that could be easily taught to one’s children and that could be recited during the day as one went about one’s work.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Herbert M. Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 152.

<sup>9</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 439.

<sup>10</sup>Gary Edward Schnittjer, *The Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 247-48.

<sup>11</sup>Daniel I. Block, “The Reading and Proclamation of Scripture in Worship” (classroom lecture notes, 80312—*Expository Preaching and the Old Testament*, January 2005, photocopy), 2.

## E. Function of the Decalogue

Scripture portrays the Decalogue as serving a variety of theological functions, all of which convey its authority and highlight the character of the one who gives it.

### 1. The Decalogue is presented as God's Word.

- a. The Decalogue is God's Word *spoken*: "And God spoke all these words, saying . . ." (Exod 20:1); and "I have talked with you from heaven" (Exod 20:22b).
- b. The Decalogue is also God's Word *written*: "And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the *two tablets* of the testimony, tablets of stone, *written* with the finger of God" (Exod 31:18, emphasis mine).
- c. "These 'ten words' were distinguished from the rest of the law of God in that they were delivered by an audible voice by God himself and then later written by God on two stone tablets."<sup>12</sup>
- d. The Decalogue thus reflects important insights about God and his ways. A believer who seeks to love him and be in sync with his ways will therefore take these commandments seriously.

### 2. The Decalogue is presented as God's manifestation.

- a. Exodus 19:16-20 describes the awesome theophany at Mount Sinai, which consists of seven striking phenomena:
  - (1) Thunder and lightning are present.
  - (2) A very loud trumpet blast is heard.
  - (3) The mountain is wrapped in smoke.
  - (4) God descends on the mountain in fire.
  - (5) The mountain trembles greatly.
  - (6) The sound of the trumpet grows louder and louder.
  - (7) The Israelites are terrified.
- b. Consequently, Mount Sinai becomes a sacred place, where only those authorized by God may enter (Exod 19:21-25). Like the tabernacle to come, it is divided into three zones:
  - (1) The summit (perhaps corresponding to the Holy of Holies), is accessible only by Moses.
  - (2) The rest of the mountain (perhaps corresponding to the Holy Place), is accessible only by a few chosen priests or elders.
  - (3) The foot of the mountain (perhaps corresponding to the courtyard), is accessible by the covenant people.

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<sup>12</sup>Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 82.

- c. In the midst of this theophany, God speaks the words of the Decalogue in the hearing of Moses and the Israelites (Exod 20:1-17). The people are so terrified by the pyrotechnics of Sinai and the sound of God’s voice that they ask Moses from now on to receive God’s revelation on their behalf and then pass it on to them secondhand. Such direct contact with God is feared to be lethal (Exod 20:18-21; Deut 5:23-27).
- d. Moses agrees to serve as the messenger, and from that point on he alone hears the voice of God and mediates the divine revelation to the Israelites. In this theophany, God is seen as holy, awesome, authoritative, and powerful—quite a contrast to the local and limited deities of Egypt, Canaan, and the rest of the ancient Near East.

### 3. The Decalogue is presented as God’s covenant framework.

- a. “And he wrote on the tablets *the words of the covenant*, the Ten Commandments” (Exod 34:28b, emphasis mine).
- b. Indeed, the entire Exodus event is rooted in covenant: “The people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and *God remembered his covenant* with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Exod 2:22b-25, emphasis mine).
- c. When the Israelites come to the foot of Mount Sinai, God addresses them in covenant terms (Exod 19:4-6a). The Decalogue thus contains “the principal obligations of the covenant”<sup>13</sup> from an almighty suzerain to his new vassals. They correspond to the general stipulations of a typical ancient Near Eastern covenant (cf. the treaty between Sun Mursillis II of Hatti and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru).
- d. After Moses smashes the stone tablets of the Decalogue in response to Israel’s violating the covenant (Exod 32:19), God rewrites the Decalogue on new tablets that Moses had made (Exod 34:1, 27-28).
- e. Apparently in keeping with ancient treaty making customs, “duplicate copies of the covenant” are made and deposited in the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies (Deut 10:1-5).<sup>14</sup>

### 4. The Decalogue is presented as God’s law.

- a. Whereas the purpose of covenant is to create a new relationship, the purpose of law is to “regulate or perpetuate an existing relationship by orderly means.”<sup>15</sup>
- b. For the Israelites, this orderly means involves not merely keeping the law, but properly revering the lawgiver as well: “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, *that the fear of him may be before you*, that you may not sin’” (Exod 20:20, emphasis mine).
- c. At first glance, Exodus 20:20 seems to contain an internal contradiction—to fear or not to fear?

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<sup>13</sup>T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 176.

<sup>14</sup>Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 121.

<sup>15</sup>Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 189.

- (1) The fear that the Israelites are to abandon is the terror that comes from an unwarranted anticipation of annihilation by this awesome, holy, transcendent God. No relationship is rightly considered healthy or loving if it is based on, and maintained by raw dread or abject fright.
  - (2) The fear that the Israelites are to maintain is a deep reverential honor—a serious covenant loyalty and obedience to God so that he might show them “steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod 20:6). A covenant is not a casual relationship; it a committed one (for both parties).
- d. The Decalogue has clear legal overtones, on at least four counts:
- (1) All ten of the commandments target the second-person singular. They are divine directives for each individual member of the covenant community.
  - (2) The first two commandments feature the first person with God as the speaker. The next three commandments speak of God in the third person. The last five commandments do not contain the expression, “the LORD your God,” but they are direct, succinct, and authoritatively presented.
  - (3) The collection contains only two positive commands (the fourth and the fifth). The remaining eight commands are negative. “This is not surprising in light of the fact that law is essentially restrictive. It functions as a deterrent and a protective. It is more proscriptive than prescriptive. Behavior in the community is regularized by the outlawing of certain types of activities.”<sup>16</sup>
  - (4) There are no casuistic laws in the collection. All of the commands are unconditional, absolute, and apodictic. The Hebrew language has two ways of expressing a prohibition:
    - (a) לֹא with the perfect expresses a specific command for a specific situation, with no implication for the future. It is the weaker of the two, and is used only twice in the legal sections of Exodus.
    - (b) אַל with the imperfect expresses a categorical prohibition of binding validity for the present and the future. It is the stronger of the two, and is used fifty-five times in the legal sections of Exodus.

“It is not incidental that the laws of prohibition in the Decalogue have been consistently couched in the strongest form of negation that the Hebrew language had available. The commandments are not open to review and/or revision by any advisory panel that may freely abandon them if convenience warrants. They have, linguistically, a built-in permanence. Obsolete they are not. Absolute they are.”<sup>17</sup>
- e. In the final analysis, however, the Decalogue is *tôrâ* law not tort law.
- (1) Significantly, no penalties or sanctions are specified for violating any of these commands. This is perhaps because the collection is meant to serve as a summary of stipulations for the Israelites and not function as “laws” in the traditional sense. They are better regard as “the Ten Principles of covenant relationship.”<sup>18</sup> Punishments listed here would therefore be inappropriate.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 188.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

- (2) The sentence for blasphemy and murder are specified later in the corpus (Lev 24:16-17). Here, however, the general ethic of Israel is introduced, and the ways of God are presented in summary form. In other ancient Near Eastern treaties, the section of covenantal requirements would normally begin with general, overarching stipulations.
- (3) “The language used in the Decalogue generally denotes broad concepts and lacks the kind of precision that one might expect from a legal document. . . . What human court could begin to enforce the prohibition against coveting described in the tenth commandment?”<sup>19</sup>
- (4) “No court of law could possibly adjudicate specific cases on the basis of the Ten Commandments alone.”<sup>20</sup>
- f. It is important to note that the negativity of the Decalogue (“Thou shalt not . . . .”) does not imply a grouchy, vindictive, or unkind author *behind* the laws.
- (1) “A rule that prohibits one particular thing still permits many others. . . . Traffic signs do not so much restrict travel, as provide for its safe and orderly movement.”<sup>21</sup>
- (2) Furthermore, the commandments certainly could have been stated positively as well as negatively, for moral laws are always double sided. Nevertheless, the Decalogue takes on a predominantly negative cast for two specific reasons: “Since it is easier to state in fewer words a command in negative form, and since that negative form strives to meet the strong current of evil in the human heart, most of the Decalogue takes this form. But our freedom in grace is so large that it would be difficult to give a set of moral prescriptions in the positive form with the scope and succinctness with which the Decalogue is presently cast.”<sup>22</sup>

## 5. The Decalogue is presented as an extension of God’s grace.

- a. The preamble of the Decalogue indicates that grace was demonstrated before obedience was demanded. The ten imperatives are preceded with one great indicative: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2). “The giving of the Law was thus a climactic moment of divine grace.”<sup>23</sup> Observing the sequence of the Decalogue, one could rightly say, “The commandments follow the gospel of undeserved deliverance.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Daniel I. Block, “Preaching Old Testament Law to New Testament Christians,” *Hiphil* 3 (2006): 7 [journal on-line], accessed 12 August 2008; available from <http://www.see-j.net/hiphil>; Internet.

<sup>19</sup>Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 178.

<sup>20</sup>Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 158.

<sup>21</sup>Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: R&R, 2006), 11.

<sup>22</sup>Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 83.

<sup>23</sup>Daniel I. Block, “The Grace of Torah: The Mosaic Prescription for Life (Deut. 4:1-8; 6:20-25),” *BSac* 162 (2005): 13.

<sup>24</sup>Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 4. Emphasis mine.

- b. The obedience called for in the Decalogue thus represents the people’s response of love and loyalty for the salvation they had received as a gift from God. In fact, the preamble “prevents us from turning the Decalogue into a set of prescriptions used to order slaves around. They are instead *rules of life for liberated people*, people who must not be foolish enough to fall back into slavery.”<sup>25</sup>
- c. Indeed, “These laws were not to be viewed as a burden laid on their shoulders which was so heavy that no one could carry it. That is not grace! That is tyranny and deceit. To Moses, receiving the revelation of God’s will was a supreme privilege—and the more detailed the revelation the greater the privilege.”<sup>26</sup>

## 6. The Decalogue is presented as God’s summary of ethical priorities.

- a. The Decalogue is “at once the very heart and kernel of a . . . system of legislation that follows and elaborates on it.”<sup>27</sup> That is, the Decalogue is the principal *summary* of God’s expectations for his covenant people, not the *totality* of those expectations.
- b. In fact, the Old Testament contains eight additional summaries to which the Israelites sometimes pointed in order to briefly state their ethical obligations:
  - (1) The eleven principles of Psalm 15:1-5
  - (2) The six commands of Isaiah 33:14-16
  - (3) The four descriptions of Psalm 24:3-6
  - (4) The three commands of Micah 6:8
  - (5) The two commands of Isaiah 56:1
  - (6) The single command of Amos 5:4
  - (7) The single command of Habakkuk 2:4
  - (8) The single command of Leviticus 19:2.
- c. Jesus continued in this same tradition by summarizing the entire law in a two-fold statement that brings together Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: “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. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:37-40; cf. Luke 10:26-28).

## F. Variations in the Decalogue

Three commandments in the second Decalogue (Deut 5:6-21) contain slight variations from the first Decalogue (Exod 20:1-17).

1. The fourth commandment contains the first variation.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>26</sup>Block, “Grace of Torah,” 14. Emphasis mine.

<sup>27</sup>Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 81.

- a. In the first Decalogue, the Israelites are to “remember” (זָכַר) the Sabbath (Exod 20:8). In the second Decalogue, the Israelites are to “keep” (שָׁמַר) the Sabbath (Deut 5:15).
  - b. In the first Decalogue, the reason to keep Sabbath is that, “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” (Exod 20:11). In the second Decalogue, the reason to keep Sabbath is 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 5:15).
2. The fifth commandment contains the second variation.

In the first Decalogue the text reads, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exod 20:12). Two phrases are added: “as the LORD your God commanded you,” and “that it may go well with you” (Deut 5:16).

3. The tenth commandment contains the third variation.
- a. In the first Decalogue, the items that are not to be coveted include “your neighbor’s house” and “your neighbor’s wife,” in that order (Exod 20:17). In the second Decalogue, those items are reversed, and “his field” is added to the list (Deut 5:21).
  - b. In the first Decalogue, the word “covet” (חָסַד) is used in reference to both the neighbor’s house and the neighbor’s wife (Exod 20:17). In the second Decalogue, the word “covet” (חָסַד) is used in reference to the neighbor’s wife, and the word “desire” (חָסַד) is used in reference to the neighbor’s house (Deut 5:21).

The explanation for these slight variations between the first and second Decalogues may be rather simple: “In Deuteronomy 5, Moses appears to be reciting the text from memory, rather than reading it verbatim from one of the tablets.”<sup>28</sup>

## G. Pessimism of the Decalogue

Shortly after the Decalogue is given, the Israelites break the very first commandment at the foot of Mount Sinai. Exodus 32 tells the story of the golden calf incident:

1. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (Exod 32:7-8).
2. The next day, “Moses said to the people, ‘You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin’” (Exod 32:30). Moses is willing to do this himself, even to the point of allowing his own name to be blotted out of God’s book instead of Israel.
3. Indeed, throughout his life, Moses witnesses the stubbornness, ingratitude, and outright rebellion of the Israelite people, and he anticipates that after his death the situation will get even worse (Deut 31:24-29). In a display of shocking revolt and covenant disloyalty, his own generation and the following generation abandon the God who brought them up out of Egypt.

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<sup>28</sup>Block, “Reading and Proclamation,” 2.

4. Subsequent generations repeat the same failure, and the covenant is eventually terminated (e.g., Jer 3:6-11). Any real hope for the future would have to rest in the establishment of a new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36-37).

## H. Old Testament Citations of the Decalogue

1. The Old Testament contains surprisingly few citations of the Decalogue. In fact, there are only four main references:
  - a. The entire Decalogue of Exodus 20 is repeated in Deuteronomy 5, with minor variations as noted earlier.
  - b. Most of the Decalogue is repeated throughout the holiness laws of Leviticus 19:1-Numbers 10:10, though not completely or in order.
  - b. Part of the Decalogue is referenced in Hosea 4:2.
  - c. Part of the Decalogue is referenced in Jeremiah 7:9.
2. Nevertheless, the recurring themes of Israel's idolatry and spiritual harlotry (e.g., Jer 3; Ezek 16; Hosea, etc.) no doubt have beneath them the nation's incessant violation of the first two commandments.
3. That there are not more direct references to the Decalogue as a whole by prophets, priests, kings, and worship leaders may indicate Israel's recognition that the Ten Commandments were a *summary* of God's instruction to Israel, not the *totality* of it.

## I. New Testament Citations of the Decalogue

The New Testament employs the Decalogue in three prominent ways.

1. The Decalogue forms the basis of Jesus' ethical teachings.
  - a. The famous antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21-48) feature parts of the Decalogue as originally given, along with some deeper implications of its divinely intended original meaning.
  - b. The strategy of Jesus in evangelizing the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16-22; cf. Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23) features the second half of the Decalogue. In that encounter, Jesus confronts the man with Commandments 6, 7, 8, 9, and 5.
2. The Decalogue forms a framework for Paul's ethical teachings.
  - a. In Romans 13:9-10, Paul teaches that Christians should love each other, thus satisfying the requirements of Old Testament law. This includes the Decalogue's prohibitions against adultery, murder, stealing, and "any other commandment," because the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" summarizes all other commandments.
  - b. In Ephesians 6:1-3, Paul instructs Christian children to obey their parents, "for this is right." He then quotes the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother," even noting parenthetically that "this is the first commandment with a promise."
  - c. In 1 Timothy 1:8-11, Paul teaches that the law is a corrective for "the lawless and disobedient." For him the Christian faith has the same ethical concern as Old Testament law,

viz., that sinning is contrary to it. To illustrate his point, Paul cites several types of sinning individuals, some of whom are involved in activities prohibited by the Decalogue.

- d. In 2 Corinthians 3:1-18, Paul contrasts the writing on tablets of stone (a clear reference to the Decalogue) with the testimonial written on human hearts by the Spirit of the living God. He goes on to say that the written code kills and is a dispensation of death and condemnation, whereas the Spirit gives life, transformation, and freedom of access to behold the glory of the Lord.
3. The Decalogue forms a backdrop for additional New Testament ethical teachings.
    - a. James argues for the unity of Old Testament law in James 2:8-13, citing various parts of the Decalogue and noting that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 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.”
    - b. In Revelation 21:8 and Revelation 22:15, John warns of the coming eschatological judgment. To identify the recipients of this judgment, he cites several types of sinning individuals, some of whom are engaged in activities prohibited by the Decalogue.

## J. Abiding Value of the Decalogue

1. As we have seen, New Testament writers occasionally appeal to the Decalogue to define normative Christian behavior. This fact cannot be overshadowed by Paul’s more negative assessments of Old Testament law because he himself is one of the writers who cites the Decalogue and applies it in a Christian context.
2. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul asserts in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that *every* part of Scripture—including, presumably, the laws of the Decalogue—is of great value to the New Testament Christian.
3. Following these lines of evidence, myriad theologians have recognized the abiding value of the Decalogue, while striving to be sensitive to its proper, non-legalistic role in the new covenant.
  - a. “God’s love gave us the law just as his love gave us the gospel, and as there is no spiritual *life* for us save through the gospel, which points us to Jesus Christ the Savior, so there is no spiritual *health* for us save as we seek in Christ’s strength to keep the law and practice the love of God and neighbor for which it calls.”<sup>29</sup> To that end, the Decalogue can be handled by the Christian *without* legalism, clearly distinguishing law “as a resource for instruction” from law “as a badge of piety or means of salvation.”
  - b. “A proper treatment of the Ten Commandments is possible only within the context of the whole Scripture. We no longer stand at the foot of Mount Sinai, but we live after Christ. For that reason, we cannot read the Ten Commandments without taking into account the Sermon on the Mount. When we consider, ‘You shall not kill, we must discuss anger and verbal abuse as well. When we seek to understand the meaning of ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ we must talk about looking at a woman lustfully (Matt 5:21-26, 27-32). We cannot confine ourselves simply to the letter of the Ten Commandments. They must be apprehended in all their depth and breadth.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Packer, *Keeping the Ten Commandments*, 12. Emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup>Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 12.

- (1) This point is especially important to keep in mind for Gentiles handling commandments that contain cultic elements, including the fourth (Sabbath) commandment. The New Testament is not so much concerned about the *particulars* of Sabbath observance; it is concerned about its original intent (Mark 2:27), its freedom of implementation by Gentile Christians (Rom 14:5-9), and the believer's insulation from judgment by those who may observe it differently (Col 2:16-17).
- (2) Significantly, the text of the Sabbath law—as originally given by God in Exodus 20:8-11—is about rest, not worship. Provisions for worship are later accretions (e.g., Lev 23:3, where שָׁבֹת is called a “holy מִקְרָא,” but even there the emphasis is on rest, and no instruction is given as to what form the מִקְרָא should take).
- (3) The Israelites who originally received the Decalogue would have been most delighted by the fourth commandment, especially in light of their recent history in the oppressive and hyper-religious country of Egypt.<sup>31</sup>
- (4) Sabbath was God's good gift to a weary people. That is why abusing it over the years incurred his wrath (e.g., Ezek 20:1-29). Jesus likewise taught that Sabbath was God's good gift (e.g., Mark 2:23-27).

### K. A Concluding Thought

John Bunyan once observed, “The man who does not know the nature of the law cannot know the nature of sin. And he who does not know the nature of sin cannot know the nature of the Savior.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately it was not Moses who was blotted out of God's book because of humanity's failure to keep the Decalogue (cf. Exod 32:32); it was Jesus. As Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal 3:10). In Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross (cf. Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), we hear the tortured cry of a man being damned by God. Yet it was the tortured cry of a *sinless* man, so the curse he bore was not his own; it was ours. And that is why lawbreakers can still be saved.

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<sup>31</sup>Ancient Egypt featured: (1) a ten-day work week with no Sabbath and very few relief points; (2) mandatory religious observances every few days; (3) numerous deities to keep straight; and (3) heavy taxes to fund their public works projects. See Pierre Montet, *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Ramesses the Great*, trans. A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop and Margaret Drower (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958), 34-36, 258.

<sup>32</sup>As quoted in Philip Graham Ryken, *Written in Stone: The Ten Commandments and Today's Moral Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 9.

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## THE LAWS OF THE DECALOGUE

### A. The Preamble (Exod 20:1-2)

<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words, saying, <sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

*Notes:*

### B. The 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:3)

<sup>3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me.

*Notes:*

### C. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:4-6)

<sup>4</sup> “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. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

*Notes:*

### D. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:7)

<sup>7</sup> “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.

*Notes:*

**E. The 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:8-11)**

<sup>8</sup>“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.

*Notes:*

**F. The 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:12)**

<sup>12</sup>“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

*Notes:*

**G. The 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:13)**

<sup>13</sup>“You shall not murder.

*Notes:*

**H. The 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:14)**

<sup>14</sup>“You shall not commit adultery.

*Notes:*

**I. The 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:15)**

<sup>15</sup>“You shall not steal.

*Notes:*

**J. The 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:16)**

<sup>16</sup>“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

*Notes:*

**K. The 10<sup>th</sup> Commandment (Exod 20:17)**

<sup>17</sup>“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.”

*Notes:*