THE DECALOGUE: COMMANDMENTS IN COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT
An in-depth technical look at the text, theology, and application of the Ten Commandments.

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Sunday Morning Greek Blog | Dig Deeper, Read Smarter, Draw Closer: Koine Greek Bible Studies

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And God spoke all these words:

2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the
earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them;
for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the
parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a
thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone
guiltless who misuses his name.

8 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping 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,
neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals,
nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens
and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore
the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

12 "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God
is giving you.

13 "You shall not murder.

14 "You shall not commit adultery.

15 "You shall not steal.

16 "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his
male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." [1]

[1] *The New International Version*. 2011. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The Decalogue: Commandments in Community

Introduction

The Ten Commandments have long been the source of doctrine and practice for Jews and Christians. They are foundational to the understanding of the character of God and the requirements he asks of his faithful followers. In this paper I will discuss the importance of the Ten Commandments as a document for establishing and maintaining a faithful community under the direction of God. As a faithful community adhering to these foundational principles, Christianity, as well as Judaism, can make great strides in restoring morality, virtue, and stability to our seemingly out-of-control world.

Textual Issues

Exodus 20 contains several textual variants,[2] none of which alter the doctrinal or theological content of the Decalogue. There are some noteworthy technical issues, however.

The first is the use of the "non-perfective of prohibition."[3] This construction is, in almost all cases, represented by לֹא (*lō*ʾ) followed by an imperfect verb. English versions traditionally render this as "You shall not" or "Do not." The construction is common in the legal sections of the Torah and usually represents the imperative mood. The prohibitions are found in vv. 3–5, 7 (twice), 10, 13–16, and 17 (twice).

Eight of the Ten Commandments begin outright with this construction. The fourth ("Remember the Sabbath") and fifth ("Honor your father and mother") commandments begin with positive statements. The fourth commandment does use this construction, however, to declare that no

[2] For a complete listing of all the textual variants, see Appendix 1.

[3] Grammatical and syntactical nomenclature throughout this paper is based on Waltke & O'Connor's *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

work was to be done on the Sabbath. The fifth commandment is entirely positive and does not use this construction at all.[4]

Significant also about these prohibitions is the use of the second person *singular* form of the verb.[5] These commandments were given to each Israelite as a significant member of the community. Addressing the commandments to the whole community would have reduced and generalized the intent and effect of the commandments.[6]

Another issue is the order of the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments. Table 1 summarizes the order of the significant Old Testament witnesses:

Table 1. A Summary of 6–8 Ordering

6, 7, 8	7, 8, 6	7, 6, 8
Exodus 20	LXX	Nash Papyrus[7]
Deuteronomy 5	Philo's *Decalogue* (36)	Philo's *Decalogue* (51ff)[8]
Josephus *Antiquities* 3:91–92		

No compelling explanation for the difference in order exists, other than perhaps a reflection of the oral tradition. The short form of the commandments would make it easy to switch their order, as anyone who has ever tried to memorize lists can testify. Durham concludes that the Masoretic text reflects the original sequence.[9]

[4] Although the command here is positive, Exodus 21:15, 17 prescribes the death penalty for anyone who takes violent or negative action against his or her parents. Weinfeld, Moshe. "The Uniqueness of the Decalogue and its place in Jewish Tradition." in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition.* ed. by Ben-Zion Segal (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990) sees the fifth commandment negatively, "to prohibit harming [the parents] in their person or in their dignity" (p. 5). A few pages later (p. 8), however, Weinfeld balks at any efforts to transform the fifth and sixth commandments into negative statements.

[5] Plural verbs are found only in vv. 5, 6, and 12.

[6] Durham, John. *Exodus.* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3. (Waco: Word, 1987), p. 284.

[7] Nash and the Bible—Side by Side - The BAS Library (biblicalarchaeology.org). Accessed February 11, 2024.

[8] Philo's first reference in his work *The Decalogue* (36) is a direct quote from the LXX. The second reference (51) is recollection and paraphrase. His commentary follows the latter order (121, 132, 135).

[9] Durham, *Exodus,* p 292.

Some New Testament passages[10] reflect the order of the Nash Papyrus. This papyrus sheds some light on Jewish liturgy around the time of Jesus. The Nash Papyrus, until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, was the oldest extant Old Testament fragment. Half of the variants identified in this passage are references to the Nash Papyrus. This fragment, which contains Exodus 20, supplemented by Deuteronomy 5 and the "benediction"[11] of the LXX's שְׁמַע (*šᵉmăʿ*), is dated to the Maccabean period. Its style is also like that of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Not strictly a biblical text (i.e., a fragment of a biblical book), its format and use of the *šᵉmăʿ* indicate that this fragment was quite probably from a liturgical scroll. The characteristic difference between this fragment and the Masoretic text is its use of the fully written *holam.*[12]

Aside from these general issues of textual criticism and translation, one specific problem presents itself. The translation of עַל־פָּנָי (*ʿal-pānāya*) in verse 3 has been problematic for some. Durham summarizes the various nuances given this phrase: "*ʿal* has variously been rendered…as expressing preference, defiance, proximity, exclusion, opposition, and the like."[13] The best way to understand this phrase is found in Holladay: "over against me." The theological implications of this will be dealt with in the appropriate section.

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[10] Luke 18:20; Rom 13:9. Passages that reflect the Masoretic order are: Matt 15:19; 19:18; Mark 10:19. The Matthew and Luke passages have the command to honor your parents at the end of this list.

[11] Danby, Herbert, tr. *The Mishnah.* (Oxford: Oxford, 1933). "The Tamid" ("Daily Whole Offerings") section (5.1) instructs the priest to recite a "Benediction" which included "the Ten Commandments, the *Šᵉmăʿ*, and the 'And it shall come to pass if ye shall hearken' [Deut 11:13–21] and the 'And the Lord spake unto Moses' [Num 15:37–41]." The last two statements seem to reflect the additional line between Ex 20:17 and Deut 6:4 on the Papyrus: "These are the laws and judgments which Moses commanded to the sons of Israel in speaking to them when he brought them out from the land of Egypt." See also Weinfeld, "Uniqueness," p. 3.

[12] Würthwein, Ernst. *The Text of the Old Testament.* Tr. by Erroll F. Rhodes. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 34, 144.

[13] Durham, *Exodus,* p. 284.

Genre and Form

Exodus 20 is most definitely law genre. It serves as a prelude to the case law laid out in 21–23 and the more detailed laws in Leviticus. The absolute nature of the commandments distinguishes itself against the conditional laws set forth in later chapters.

Many have compared the corpus of Israelite law to the Code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi's Code is a listing of casuistic or conditional laws very similar to the ones found in Exodus or Leviticus. But nowhere in Hammurabi's Code can one find the type of absolute statements reflected by the Decalogue.

Many scholars believe, and perhaps rightly so, that the original form of the Decalogue was much shorter. Below is the most commonly cited original form, based on my translation and analysis. Those scholars who have significant differences are cited in the footnote.

Table 2. Commonly cited original form of the Decalogue

Prologue	I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt.
First	You shall not have for yourself other gods.
Second	You shall not make for yourself a shaped image.[14]
Third	You shall not use the name of Yahweh your God worthlessly.
Fourth	Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.[15]
Fifth	Give honor to your father and your mother.
Sixth	You shall not kill.
Seventh	You shall not commit adultery.
Eighth	You shall not steal.
Ninth	You shall not testify against your neighbor falsely.
Tenth	You shall not covet the house of your neighbor [nor shall you covet the wife of your neighbor].[16]

[14] Smith, J. M. Powis. *The Origin and History of Hebrew Law.* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1931) pp. 6–7 lists the Prologue as the first commandment and combines the first and second for the second commandment. According to Nielsen, this order is the same as the Jewish breakdown of the Ten Commandments. See Nielsen, Eduard. *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective: A Traditio-Historical Approach.* (Naperville: Allenson, 1968), p. 10.

[15] I follow Smith on this commandment. Durham cuts it off after "day." The presence of *lᵉqaddəshōʷ* ("to make holy") in the original commandment may explain the significant expansion that this one has undergone. Anthony Phillips (*Ancient Israel's Criminal Law.* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970) p. 64) takes a completely different position. He translates *zāḵôr* as a gerund: "remembering the Sabbath." He argues that this first phrase is an addition, and that the original form of the commandment was "Six days you shall work, but the seventh day Sabbath." This seems untenable considering the importance of the Sabbath throughout the law code.

The form of these commandments is apodictic, or absolute, as opposed to the casuistic construction of Exodus 21–23. The commentators almost unanimously agree that this is intentional because the Decalogue was and is intended for general application. Everyone in the community came under the governance of the commandments. The casuistic laws ("if-then" statements) applied to the specific circumstances or the specific groups of people mentioned and appear to be built upon the foundational principles outlined in the Decalogue.

Given the Jewish propensity for expanding on the law and building hedges around it,[17] one should not be surprised to find that some of the commandments have been expanded. The second, fourth, and tenth commandments show some significant expansion, while the third and fifth show some minor expansion. The expansion of the third and fourth commandments reveal some intentional structure, which will be discussed below.

The expansion of the second commandment was evidently to clarify some misunderstanding about an "idol" or a "shaped image" as Durham translates it. Stricter Jews have seen in this a prohibition against any artwork that represents living things. But this was obviously not the intention of God. For example, the instructions on the ark and the tabernacle included the fashioning of cherubim.[18] The lampstand also included "three cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms."[19] What is obvious is that these articles and any other manmade items or images for the Tabernacle were not to be worshipped as God or as a substitute for him.

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[16] According to Nielsen's helpful chart (*ibid.*), Catholics and Lutherans divide the tenth commandment (house/wife) while combining the first and second. Since a wife was technically considered "property," the first phrase includes all the other properties cited. The LXX, Nash Papyrus, and other witnesses have "wife" before "house," in accordance with Deuteronomy 5:21, which may support this ordering.

[17] *The Mishnah, The Talmud,* etc.

[18] Ex 25:18–20; 26:1, 31.

[19] Ex 25:33–34.

The expansion of the fourth commandment was apparently necessary because of its vagueness. Surely a clever Jew could come up with several different ways to "remember the Sabbath to keep it holy" that were less than pleasing to God. Even today, many church goers and Christian "wannabes" offer excuses for not going to church like: "I worshipped God in my heart today"; "I did not feel 'holy' today, so I did not want to go and be a hypocrite." God intends for the Sabbath to be a time of community rest, an implied rejuvenation and refocusing on God. More will be said of these and the other expanded commandments later.

Historical and Cultural Settings

The immediate historical setting of the Decalogue places this event at Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai was the destination of the Israelites from the time Yahweh called to Moses out of the burning bush on that same mountain.[20] Mount Sinai was a three-month journey from Ramses located in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula.[21]

The cultural setting is a matter of great discussion among the commentators. Rowley, for example, sees in the Decalogue the beginnings of monotheism. The following quotation reveals his bias:

> The God, or gods, hitherto worshipped by the Israelites were identified with Yahweh, and ceased to count as against Him. There was no conflict between Yahweh and them. He just gathered them into Himself, and in so far as they had characteristics different from His, they ceased to have meaning for Moses. The name of Israel's God was henceforth Yahweh; but His character was not derived from her own or from Kenite traditions so much as from the redeeming acts which had brought blessing to Israel.[22]

[20] Ex 3:1, 12 (Horeb=Sinai).

[21] Ex 19:1; 13:17–18.

[22] Rowley, H. H. *From Moses to Qumran: Studies in the Old Testament.* (New York: Association, 1963) pp. 59–60. Rowley holds to the now outdated documentary hypothesis.

Rowley apparently chooses to ignore the monotheism of Genesis, however. Certainly Genesis 1 presumes monotheism, and Adam and Eve were surely monotheists. The patriarchs all acknowledge one God and do not seem to fear other gods.[23] Nor do we have any evidence in the latter part of Genesis that Joseph worshipped the Egyptian gods. He appears to have been faithful to God throughout his life.

Certain additions to the original form of the Ten Commandments seem to hint at a settled Israel rather than the nomadic Israel that would spend forty years in the wilderness. The tenth commandment, for example, speaks of a neighbor's "house." For a nomadic people, we would rather expect אֹהֶל (*ʾōhěl*), "tent." Also the six days of work in the fourth commandment imply a settled situation ("the alien within your gates"). These cultural clues suggest that the Ten Commandments achieved their final form some time after settling in Canaan. One must also consider, however, that these expansions may have been established while still in the wilderness as the Israelites pondered the implications and applications of the law.

One final historico-cultural factor deserves mention here. The fact that the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant come on the heels of Moses's establishment of a hierarchy of judges is not accidental. The Commandments on the one hand represent a legal code by which the judges could decide their cases. On the other hand, the casuistic laws of 21–23, which reflect the Ten Commandments, and the expansions on the original form of the Commandments could be seen as (1) a commonsense application of the basic principles; and (2) evidence of an "open" God who interacts with his people in the establishment of their covenant law.

Terence Fretheim takes this latter idea a step further:

[23] See, for example, the encounter between Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31. Apparently the patriarch's wife had little fear or regard for Laban's household gods.

> The various canonical expansions of some commandments…witness to an ongoing effort by Israel to address changing life situations. *This gives the people of God in every age an innerbiblical warrant to expand on them.* If the decalogue is understood as Israel's bill of rights, the way for amendment is open…. The canon of the Ten Commandments is an open canon, and our instruction should recognize this.[24]

This is certainly a bold statement about the fluidity of the commandments. At first glance, one might conclude that Fretheim has opened the door to legalism, that is, anyone could expand on the Ten Commandments and establish their own rules of conduct, and certainly some have done that. The intention is not legalism, however, but an ongoing dialogue within the faith community on the applicability of these fundamental principles. Fretheim stands firm that the original Ten should not be discarded,[25] but leaves the door open for new "commandments" as life and culture grow and change.

Structure

The absence of the *sôf pāsûq* at the ends of verses 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10, in spite of its presence in many other manuscripts, makes for an interesting structural consideration. If the Masoretes intended to identify the "ten words"[26] by their punctuation, the breakdown is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. The "ten words" according to Masoretic punctuation

vs. 1	Introduction
vs. 2	Prologue
vv. 3-5	First Word
vs. 6	Second Word
vs. 7	Third Word
vv. 8-17	Fourth-Tenth Words according to traditional breakdown.[27]

[24] Fretheim, Terence. *Exodus.* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching. (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), p. 222, italics in original.

[25] ibid. p. 222.

[26] Ex 34:28. "Ten" does not appear in the text of Exodus 20.

[27] See Mordechai Breuer's discussion in "Dividing the Decalogue into Verses and Commandments" in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition, op.cit.,* pp. 291–330, esp. pp. 309–314. Breuer's technical discussion focuses on the cantillation of the verses and the clues that offers to their division.

The significance of this is the isolation of verse 6. This verse is a primary statement about God's love, which is the foundation for all his commandments. "I am the one who shows love חֶסֶד (*ḥěsěḏ*) to thousands who love אָהַב (*ʾāhăḇ*) me and keep my commandments." One should not think it unusual, however, that this foundational word finds itself in the third position. God first establishes his supremacy and worthiness before declaring his love for those who love him.

Verses 1–6 form a chiastic structure:

1 Introduction

2 "I am Yahweh your God"
3 "You shall not"
4 "You shall not"
5a "You shall not"
5b "I, Yahweh your God"
6 "[I am] the one who shows"[28]

This structure focuses on the first three commands, in which Yahweh establishes his supremacy over the pagan idols. Because it is surrounded by three "I am" statements, it is clear that the first three commandments establish Yahweh's character and integrity.

Verses 7–11 demonstrate a rough parallelism, which reveals the hand of a later editor. Verse seven is outlined in the Hebrew word order:

Not lift up (תִּשָּׂא *ṯiśśāʾ*)
the name
of Yahweh your God
unto meaninglessness
for not hold guiltless
Yahweh
those who lift up (יִשָּׂא *yiśśāʾ*)

[28] One commentator has seen in this structure evidence of an original dodecalogue (to correspond with the twelve tribes), with the Prologue (vs. 2) being the first commandment, and the second commandment (vv. 4–6) broken up into two (4, 5–6). See Rabast, K. *Das apodiktische Recht im Deuteronomium und im Heiligkeitsgesetz.* (Berlin, 1949), pp. 35ff, cited in Stamm, J. J. and Andrew, M. E. *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research.* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1967), p. 20. A similar but unsuccessful argument was made for the twelve apostles in the formulation of the Apostle's Creed.

the name
unto meaninglessness.

The emphasis in verse 7 appears to be the consequence for those who "lift up" Yahweh's name in a meaningless or worthless manner. This led to a prohibition of the pronunciation of "Yahweh" by the Jews so that they would not even be in danger of violating this commandment.

Verses 8–11 present a much sharper parallel structure, centered on the creation narrative:

8 Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy

9 Six days you shall labor. . .
10 seventh is a Sabbath . . . do no work
11 six days Yahweh made. . .
rested on the seventh day
Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

P. J. Wiseman has argued that this commandment shows the Genesis 1 creation narrative was told the way it was for the purpose of establishing the Sabbath, and thus the fourth commandment.[29]

Verses 2 and 12 form an inclusio around the first five commandments by the use of the two words most commonly used for "land" (אֶרֶץ *ʾĕrĕṣ* and אֲדָמָה *ʾăḏāmā(h)*). The first five commands are traditionally thought to be the ones on the first tablet of the two Moses received on Mount Sinai. This makes a nice unit of the commandments that focus on our relationship to our heavenly authority. The fifth commandment also provides a transition from our heavenly relationships to our earthly relationships by focusing on our earthly authorities, our parents.

[29] See his book *Creation Revealed in Six Days.* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1946). This "revelation-day" theory has some appeal to me. The structural genius of Genesis 1 (see Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis.* The Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Dallas: Word, 1994)) would seem to indicate that something other than a literal six-day creation is being recounted. In another book by a different author (I do not recall his name) entitled *Creation Revealed,* the author suggests that the creation story was revealed to Moses in his first six days on Mount Sinai recounted in Exodus 24:15–18. Of course, this is simply speculation, and there is no way to prove this decisively.

If Alt's analysis of the eighth commandment maintains that a chiastic structure for verses 13–15 reveals itself,[30] then "stealing a man" was considered the equivalent of murder, because it removed the man from the faith community.[31] The Joseph story is a prime example of this interpretation. The brothers, in their crime, had to consider Joseph as good as dead. But as I shall discuss later, many have problems with Alt's theory on this commandment.

Exodus 20 reveals a great deal of intentional structure, which testifies to its importance in Israel's law code. I shall now turn to a discussion of its placement in and relevance to the book of Exodus, the Pentateuch, and the Old Testament.

Literary Contexts

As I've already shown, Exodus 20 fits naturally into the narrative of the larger book of Exodus.[32] In Exodus 18, Moses heeds Jethro's advice to establish a hierarchy of judges, so that Moses would not become burned out in dealing with the Israelite's problems. The Ten Commandments represent the constitution or bill of rights on which these judges would make decisions. Presumably, the average Israelite would be aware of these commands as well and could settle disputes or admit wrongdoing even before taking his or her case to the judge.

A consideration of key words and ideas found in Exodus 20 reveals that many of the commandments find expansion and further clarification in 20:22–23:33, and especially through 23:13. Table 4 outlines how this section expands on the Ten Commandments:

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[30] Alt, A. *Das Verbot des Diebstahls im Dekalog.* Kleine Schriften I. (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1953). pp. 333–40. Alt is cited in virtually all commentaries I consulted on this passage. Alt argues that the eighth commandment referred to stealing a man (see Ex 21:16). Alt, however, seems to have very few supporters (e.g. Nielsen, *op.cit.* p. 91). More will be said of this command in the Theology section of this paper.

[31] Phillips, Anthony (*op.cit.*). Phillips argues that violation of any of the Ten Commandments resulted in the death penalty. But the absence of any specific punishments in the decalogue make this argument untenable for some. See the discussion below.

[32] Fretheim (*op.cit.,* p. 202) has demonstrated that chapters 19–40 consist of four different sets of legal or priestly instruction, each introduced by four narratives (19:1–25; 20:18–21; 24:1–18; and 32:1–34:35).

Table 4. References to Decalogue in Exodus 20:22–23:33

Exodus	Commandment
20:22–26	1–2
21	4–6; [8 is alluded to in vs. 16]
22:1–15	8 & 10
22:16–31	1-3 & 7
23:1–9	9
23:10–13	1–4, esp. 4
23:14–25	2 (worship)
23:25–33	5 (the promise of long life in the land)

Exodus 23:25–26 provides an important transition for understanding the second and fifth commandments. In this verse, we see more clearly the transitional nature of the fifth commandment in the context of the Decalogue. The fifth commandment promises long life and well-being[33] in the land if parents are honored. God makes a similar promise conditional on the Israelite community's exclusive worship of him in 23:25–26.

Several other passages also reflect the decalogue. The closest copy of Exodus 20 is found in Deuteronomy 5:6–21. Three significant differences between the two passages deserve mention here. First, in the fourth commandment, there is an iteration of the deliverance from Egypt (compare 5:6 with 5:15). Secondly, the phrase "that it may go well with you in the land" is added to the fifth commandment in verse 16 (NIV). Not only does this reflect Exodus 23:20–33, but it looks forward to Deuteronomy 28–30. Finally, in the tenth commandment, "wife" and "house" are switched around. The order here may be an attempt to place the wife in a higher position as a more valuable "piece of property" than the land. The Exodus 20 order, however, groups the human "property" together. Neither order, I think, demeans the value and worth placed on the woman as a member of the community, not just as "property."

The Decalogue also finds modified expression in Exodus 34, Leviticus 19, and Deuteronomy 27. Exodus 34 recounts the story of Moses chiseling out two new stone tablets. These new tablets

[33] Dt 5:16.

replaced the ones he destroyed in anger upon seeing the people worship the golden calf. Leviticus 19 is a chapter on "various laws"[34] couched between two chapters on unlawful sexual relationships. Table 5 summarizes the direct references and allusions to Exodus 20.

Many commentators have also drawn attention to Deuteronomy's reliance on the Decalogue.[35] Both Craigie[36] and Miller[37] see Deuteronomy 5–11 as a sermon on the Decalogue, especially as it pertains to the *Šᵉmăʿ*. The focus is on the love of God and how that love compelled him to establish a covenant relationship with his people.[38]

Table 5. References to Decalogue in Key Pentateuch Passages

Exodus 20	Exodus 34	Leviticus 19[39]	Deuteronomy 27
Prologue		34	
First (3)	14		
Second (4–6)	7, 13–17	4, 19, 37	15, 26
Third (7)		12	
Fourth (8–11)	21	2, 3, 30, 33–34	19
Fifth (12)		3, 32	16
Sixth (13)		14,[40] 16	24–25
Seventh (14)	15–16	19–22,[41] 29	20–23
Eighth (15)		11, 13	18
Ninth (16)		11, 15–18, 19	19
Tenth (17)		13, 17–18	17

Outside of the Pentateuch, Jeremiah 7:9 presents a terse summary of five of the commandments: Yahweh is questioning the integrity of those who would worship in his temple after violating

[34] Based on the NIV subheading.

[35] See, for example, Craigie, P. C. *The Book of Deuteronomy.* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Miller, Patrick D. *Deuteronomy.* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990).

[36] *op.cit.* p. 68

[37] *op.cit.* p. 65

[38] Craigie, *op.cit.,* p. 37.

[39] Weinfeld (p. 12) sees the reverse order of the fifth, fourth, and second commandments in vv. 3-4 as a chiasmus with Exodus 20. The themes of these three commandments are repeated in the last part of the chapter (vv. 30-37).

[40] "Curse" means wishing someone dead, so it's appropriate to link this with the prohibition against murder.

[41] "It is also a reasonable assumption that the Commandment 'Do not commit adultery' is intended to include the laws against mixing incongruous species of plant, animal or clothing; the law of the designated slave woman; and the ban on the fruit of trees during their first three years." Weinfeld, *op.cit.,* p. 13.

these commandments. Ezekiel 18 shows a similar reliance on the Decalogue. Verse 4 says: "The soul who sins is the one who will die." The passage goes on to list many sins: those who do not commit those sins shall live; those who do shall die.

The minor prophets also show a reliance on the Decalogue. Hosea 4:2 is a good example of this. After the prophet has demonstrated Israel's unfaithfulness by marrying a prostitute, Hosea speaks a scathing rebuke to those who "break all bounds" by "cursing, lying, and murder[ing], stealing, and [committing] adultery." Even in this period, the Ten Commandments still maintain their foundational quality for moral behavior.

Important Words

Many important words that reflect the core issues of each of the commandments will be dealt with in the theology section. There are, however, a few words which indirectly influence our understanding of the decalogue.

The two words translated "land" (אֶרֶץ *ʾĕrĕṣ* and אֲדָמָה *ʾăḏāmā(h)*) are quite prominent in the decalogue and related passages. The two words are found a total of six times (combined) in Exodus 20, nine times in 21–23, and twenty times total in Exodus 34, Leviticus 19, and Deuteronomy 5.[42]The land is the basis of the promise and the reason for the Exodus. Their wide-ranging use in all these passages reflects the commitment to see the promise fulfilled by adherence to the law.

The Hebrew words for "work," "serve as a slave" (verb) and "labor," "slave" (noun) is found seven times as a verb עָבַד (*ʿāḇăḏ*), ten times as a noun עֶבֶד (*ʿĕḇĕḏ*) in Exodus 20–23. Israel's 430 years in slavery is seen as a constant reminder to Israel to treat her slaves with decency and

[42] All word counts based on Logos morphological search features. See Appendix 2 for a summary of significant word frequencies.

respect. Also implicit in *ʿāḇăḏ* is a strong work ethic. Israel's transition into the promised land would not be an easy task. Yes, Yahweh would be with them, but this did not free them from the responsibility to destroy their enemies and their enemies' "gods," plant and harvest their crops, and build their new homes.

The final word to be considered in this section is קָדַשׁ (*qā·ḏăš*), "to make holy." Although it only occurs two times in chapter 20, it (or its noun form) is found four times in chapter 19. The purpose of the Ten Commandments is clear: following all of them makes the community "a holy nation."[43]

Theology

Exodus 20 lends itself to two branches of theology: theology proper (one through four), and socio-anthropology (five through ten). These two areas will be dealt with separately.

Theology Proper

The theology proper of the decalogue is quite clear. Yahweh is the one true God who deserves the complete and utter devotion and reverence of his followers. All other gods are *dei non esse.* His miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt demonstrated the depth of his love for Israel. Not only this, but it also demonstrated his integrity to honor the promises he made to their forefathers some five centuries earlier.

Some commentators see the first two commands as representing a polytheistic world view among the Jews, or at best, a monolatry.[44] On the contrary, I see the statements here about not making idols as reflecting a pointless activity. Certainly other nations created idols to represent their conceptions of their gods, but no statement is made here about the supposed reality they

[43] Ex 19:6

[44] See Hyatt, J. P. *Exodus.* The New Century Bible Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 210–11; and Stamm and Andrew, p. 81.

represent. In fact, there was no reality behind it. Earl Kalland suggests that the wood or stone itself, out of which the idol was fashioned, was in fact the "god."[45] God is jealous for their attention and despises their attention to empty forms and nonexistent deities.

The theology of the Sabbath (derived from a root meaning "to rest"[46]) is also important here. Not only did the Sabbath rest symbolize God's rest on the seventh day, but the use of *ʿāḇăḏ* (see above) also helped the Israelites to "remember" that they had received rest from their slavery.[47] God's mighty hand had delivered them, and the Israelites owed him at least one day per week of special reverence.

One interesting note on the Sabbath is pertinent: nowhere in the Pentateuch is any specific, regular religious observance or assembly commanded for the Sabbath. The Sabbath seems to have simply been a day of rest and rejuvenation.

Socio-Anthropology

From a theological perspective, the Sabbath command stands as a transition between theology proper and the socio-anthropology reflected in the final six commands. The extended commands of the Sabbath, along with the final six commands, demonstrate a profound respect for life, those who give us life, and the fruit of a life marked by honest hard work.

Along with this is the emphasis on the community relationships within Israel. Commentators are nearly unanimous in focusing on this aspect. The decalogue and the covenant are intended to

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[45] Kalland, Earl S. 1999. "353 גָּלַל." In *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press. The article deals with many words that refer to idols, including *pesel,* the word used in v. 4.

[46] e.g. Durham, p. 289 and Hamilton, Victor P. 1999. "2323 שָׁבַת." In *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press. The word may derive from the Akkadian *sabattu, sapattu*, which denoted the dividing, mid-point (full moon) day of the month.

[47] Dt 5:15 clearly reflects this point.

bind the community together in purpose and action. The protection of community was such a priority, that violation of any one of these commandments could lead to the death penalty.

Fifth Commandment. There is no mystery about the meaning of כָּבֵד (*kā·ḇēḏ*; "honor"). The reason for honoring your parents should be obvious, but just in case, the Book of the Covenant makes it clear that any violence against one's parents, whether physical or verbal, warranted the death penalty.[48] The reward for honoring one's parents is the opposite of death: long life in the land. Parents are our human authority, representing God to us. They therefore deserve a similar honor.

Sixth Commandment. The word רָצַח (*rāṣăḥ*) is a rather uncommon word for killing or murder in the Old Testament. Much more common is מוּת (*mûṯ*).[49] In Numbers 35, *rāṣăḥ* is used 20 times primarily to refer to an accidental killing and the flight of the unfortunate suspect to a city of refuge for protection. Yet it refers to intentional killing as well.[50]

The problem presents itself of justifying this commandment with the charge to Joshua in Deuteronomy 31:1–5 to destroy the nations currently inhabiting the promised land. Is this "holy war" command an intentional violation of the covenant at the request of God? The answer here is certainly negative. Phillips seems to be on the right track when he says: "The significance of *rāṣăḥ* is not that it defines a particular illegal act, but that in distinction from other words for killing, it indicates where the killing takes place, namely within the covenant community."[51]

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[48] Ex 21:15, 17.

[49] *mûṯ* occurs 28 times in Exodus 19–23, while *rāṣăḥ* occurs 47 times in the entire Old Testament, based on the Logos morphological word search feature.

[50] Num 35:27, 30; 2 Kings 6:32. See White, William. 1999. "2208 רָצַח." In *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press.

[51] op.cit. p. 83.

Phillips goes on to cite the specific example of the blood-feud in Israel, when two covenant clans are disputing. The prohibition was an attempt to eliminate that as well as other forms of unnecessary killing. The commandment, then, is not seen as prohibiting any killing (capital punishment, war, or the slaughter of animals) but only that killing which was directed against members of the covenant community, and perhaps even those friendly to it. In other words, it would technically be more akin to murder rather than manslaughter or a justified use of deadly force in self-defense or the defense of others.

Seventh Commandment. The word נָאַף (*nāʾăp̄*) represents a violation of a covenantal marital or betrothal relationship, otherwise known as adultery. This should be distinguished from *zānâ,* which generally implied prostitution or other "illicit heterosexual relations."[52] Again the focus here is the covenant relationship, not only between the man and woman, but between Israel and God.[53] See footnote 38 above for a broader understanding of this commandment.

Eighth Commandment. The word for "steal," גָּנַב (*gānăḇ*), is found five times in Exodus 21–23. Four of those times it refers to stealing property or livestock. The other occurrence, 21:16, refers to stealing a man, or kidnapping. This has led Alt to conclude that the original form of this commandment was "You shall not steal a man."[54] A primary reason for this is that the other commandments call for the death penalty when violated. Since theft of property is usually dealt with as tort (replacement at equal value), the simple command "you shall not steal" seems out of place.

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[52] Coppes, Leonard J. 1999. "1273 נָאַף." In *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press.

[53] The word is also used in connection with Israel's idolatry, e.g. Is 57:1–13. See also Durham, p. 294 and Phillips (*op.cit.*), pp. 110–129.

[54] See footnote 28 above.

Durham argues that the nature of the penalty should not be a factor in determining the original intention of this command.[55] Phillips takes the opposite viewpoint and concludes that the commandment not only refers to kidnapping but selling the formerly free Israelite into slavery outside of the covenant community.[56]

I believe a middle ground can be forged between these two extremes, based on consideration of Ex 21:16. Examining the structure of Ex 21:1–27, one discovers the severity with which man stealing was treated in the covenant:

1 Introduction

2-11 Hebrew Slaves
12-14 Striking a man/conditionality
15 Physically attacking Father/Mother
16 Kidnapping
17 Verbally attacking Father/Mother
18-25 Striking a man or a pregnant woman/conditionality
[18-19 Striking a man]
[20-21 Striking a Slave]
[22-25 Striking a pregnant woman]
26-27 Hebrew Slaves

Kidnapping is the focus of the first major section of the Book of the Covenant! Surrounding it, in a clear chiastic structure, are commands related to the fair treatment of slaves (fourth), honoring parents (fifth), and murder (sixth). Clearly then, the eighth commandment must include the crime of kidnapping, along with the stealing of other physical property.

As I hinted at above in the "Structure" section, the story of Joseph seems to have strong connection to the eighth commandment, and the chiastic structure above fits that story to a tee. Not only was Joseph attacked and kidnapped by his brothers and sold into slavery, but his brothers essentially cursed their father by lying to him about what really happened to Joseph. It is

[55] *op.cit.,* p. 295.

[56] *op.cit.,* p. 130.

almost as if the very first dialogue after the delivery of the Ten Commandments is a stark warning to Israel not to do such a thing again, even though, as Joseph himself admitted, God intended that course of events for the salvation of Israel in that day.

Ninth Commandment. Again, the unanimity of the commentators on the understanding of this commandment is overwhelming.[57] The technical Hebrew word עָנָה (*ʿānā(h)*) mean "to testify" in legal settings. The literal translation of the verse is "Do not testify a deceptive testimony [עֵד שָׁקֶר] against your neighbor [רֵעַ (*rēᵃ ʿ*)]." The commandment, therefore, refers to testimony before a court of one's peers. Fretheim acknowledges that the commandment was expanded to include all forms of lying and deception. Deuteronomy 5:20's use of עֵד שָׁוְא (instead of עֵד שָׁקֶר from Exodus) hearkens back to the third commandment about using God's name in a "worthless" or empty manner.

The use of רֵעַ (*rēᵃ ʿ*) in the last two commandments reveals fully the community emphasis of the decalogue. A neighbor was not just one who lived next door, but a fellow member of the covenant community. In the New Testament section below, I will address Jesus's expansion on this idea.

Tenth Commandment. Johannes Herrmann[58] has discovered a fundamental difference between חָמַד (*ḥāmăḏ*) and אָוָה (*ʾāwā(h)*), the latter used in Deuteronomy 5:21 in the Masoretic text in the second part of the commandment. This is important, because the concept of coveting is not extensively dealt with in the rest of the legal literature. The main issue is whether coveting refers only to the mental attitude of the Israelite, or if something deeper is intended. Some have found it strange that at the end of a list of prohibitions against certain actions, the prohibition of an

[57] e.g. Fretheim, *op.cit.,* pp. 236–37; Hyatt, *op.cit.,* p. 215.

[58] "Das zehnte Gebot." Sellin-Festschrift. (Leipzig, 1927) pp. 69–82, cited in Stamm and Andrew, *op.cit.,* p. 102.

attitude is found.[59] What Herrmann discovered was that *ḥāmăḏ* not only refers to the attitude, but all that goes through the mind in trying to obtain the thing, person, or animal desired, whether legal or not.[60] Rofé goes on to argue that the use of *ʾāwā(h)* in Deuteronomy 5:21 means a desire left unfulfilled. Caution must be used in making a strong case out of this, since in the Samaritan Pentateuch and two Qumran scrolls, *ḥāmăḏ* is used instead of *ʾāwā(h).*[61]

The other issue here, then, is the relationship between this commandment and the eighth commandment. If both commandments refer to stealing, then what is the significant difference between the two? Rofé cites Maimonides' conclusion that the tenth commandment refers to planning a "heist," or "casing" a neighbor's home to discover what of value can be procured.[62]

Summary

The Ten Commandments lay down the guidelines for living in community with one another. They also place a supreme value on freedom and the fruits thereof. Although no penalties are listed in the context of the Decalogue, the corpus of the covenant law bears out strict, even fatal penalties for violation of this foundational code of behavior.

New Testament and Application

Invariably, when we find the decalogue referred to in the New Testament, especially the Gospels, application is not far behind. Therefore, I will deal with these last two steps of my exegesis together.

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[59] Stamm and Andrew, *op.cit.,* pp. 101–2.

[60] Rofé, Alexander. "The Tenth Commandment in the Light of Four Deuteronomic Laws." *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition. op.cit.,* pp. 45–65. Rofé cites several Rabbinic sources to confirm this point.

[61] ibid., pp. 50–53.

[62] ibid., p. 64.

Although the first four commandments are not directly quoted in the New Testament, there are many parallels which drive home the uniqueness and worthiness of God. 1 Cor 6:9–10 says that idolators, adulterers, thieves, the greedy, and slanderers, among many others, do not have any inheritance in the kingdom of God. The penalty in the Old Testament was physical death; in the New, spiritual death. But vs. 11 says that Christ has provided the way to cleanse us and free us from the penalty of sin to become a holy people.

Later in chapter 8, Paul confirms the uniqueness of God: "for us there is but one God, the Father…and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ."[63] We are commanded to worship this one God "in spirit and in truth"[64] so that we may be made holy and perfect through the sacrifice of Christ.[65]

The concept of the Sabbath rest is also addressed in the New Testament. In Mark 3:27, Jesus says that the Sabbath is intended for mankind's benefit. Mankind is to find their rest in the Sabbath, not worry about whether they're going to break it. The author of Hebrews looks forward to a Sabbath-rest for the people of God, which is the consummation of his kingdom.[66]

Gordon MacDonald has picked up on the idea of a Sabbath rest. In his book *Ordering Your Private World,* he speaks of the importance of reflecting on our work: "The rest God instituted was meant first and foremost to cause us to interpret our work, to press meaning into it, to make sure we know to whom it is properly dedicated."[67] MacDonald goes on to suggest that we intentionally set aside one day per week, not necessarily Saturday or Sunday, for the express

[63] 1 Cor 8:6

[64] John 4:24

[65] Heb 10:1–10

[66] Heb 4:1–11

[67] Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985, p. 165, italics in original.

purpose of reflection and drawing near to God. In doing so, we provide ourselves the context for applying significance to our work.

One passage that comes to mind when talking about the Law in the New Testament is Matthew 5–7, the Sermon on the Mount.[68] In the Old Testament, the focus of the commandments was extremely practical, even the tenth commandment on coveting (see the discussion in the Theology section). Jesus cuts to the heart of the law, however. He shows that attitudes are important, and that the wrong attitude can be just as fatal as the wrong action. Instead of preaching the death sentence for those caught in these sins (murder, adultery, swearing an oath, the *lex talionis,* covetousness), Jesus encourages members of the faith community to seek reconciliation and to rid their lives of things or attitudes that lead to sin. His overarching principle, as is the Deuteronomic author's, is "love your neighbor."

In Luke 10:25–37, the concept of loving your neighbor is given radical expression by Jesus. In the discussion of the ninth commandment above, I pointed out that "neighbor" implied a member of the covenant community. In this parable of the good Samaritan, the one who is the neighbor is certainly not a member of the covenant community. In fact, he is a member of the race most hated by the Jews. This may explain the law expert's reluctance to pronounce the name "Samaritan" as a neighbor of the Jews.

Just as the decalogue appeared to be a dynamic code (see Fretheim's quote above), so today we can make some specific applications from these commandments. The following is an apodictic decalogue, although not inclusive, that might be appropriate today.

You shall not abort a child.
You shall not cheat on your taxes.

[68] The parallel passage to this is Luke 6:17–49.

You shall not speed when no police are present.

You shall not view pornographic media.

Honor your stepfather or stepmother.

Remember to worship God at least one day each week.

You shall not use your time and talents worthlessly.

You shall not desire your neighbor's Cadillac.

You shall not tax your subjects dry.

You shall not have sex outside a duly ordained heterosexual marriage.

And the list goes on.

The importance of the Ten Commandments for teaching moral values is also achieving popularity today. Writers like William J. Bennett[69] and Allan Bloom[70] look to the Bible, the Ten Commandments, and school prayer to restore a sense of fundamental values to our children. Commentators Rush Limbaugh, Paul Harvey, and even Ted Koppel[71] historically have argued for the importance of the morality supported by the Ten Commandments. Even national news magazines are getting on the bandwagon.[72]

Conclusion

The Ten Commandments reflect a foundational document for the establishment of a community of a people of God. Because they are foundational, they can be built upon by successive generations of the faithful as life situations change and new challenges present themselves. They reflect the love of God, who led his people out of the bondage of slavery in the

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[69] *The Devaluing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children.* (New York: Summit, 1992).

[70] *The Closing of the American Mind.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

[71] In a commencement address at Duke University, Ted Koppel said of the Ten Commandments: "They are called the Ten Commandments, not the five suggestions." Cited by Rebecca Manley Pippert at Urbana '87, Champaign, IL, italics implied.

[72] Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Remember the Sermon on the Mount?" *Time.* October 31, 1994. Her focus is on social justice for the poor, but then, is that not what Christianity is all about?

Old Testament, and out of the bondage to sin in the New and point us to a time when we know that eternal life, in the kingdom he is preparing for us.

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Appendix 1

Exodus 20 Text Critical Notes

Based on BHS Sigla

1a	LXX/Vulgate have Lord for *elohim*
3a	LXX/Syriac & Targums have "besides me" for "before me"
3b	Error in text, should have ":" at end; also 4, 8b, 9a, 10g
5a	Nash Papyrus is fully written (see Josh 24:19, Nahum 1:2).
7a	Nash Papyrus has *shmh* for *sh^{e}mo^{w}* (fem instead of masc)
8a	Sam. Pentateuch has *shamo^{w}r* ("guard") for *zako^{w}r* ("remember").
10a	Nash Papyrus has "In the seventh day . . ."
10b	Nash Papyrus adds "in it."
10c	Many manuscripts add waw-consecutive.
10d	Nash Papyrus adds "your ox and your ass," cf. Dt 5:14.
10e	Sam. Pentateuch does not have waw-consecutive.
10f-f	LXX has "those who live among you as foreigners."
11a	Many manuscripts have waw-consecutive on DDO.
11b	Nash Papyrus, LXX, Syriac have "seventh" instead of "Sabbath."
11c	Nash Papyrus has "keep them holy."
12a	Nash Papyrus, LXX have "in order that may go well for you"
12b	LXX has "the good land."
13a	LXX, Philo X:36 have this order: 14, 15, 13. Nash Papyrus, Philo XII:51, Luke 18:20, Romans 13:9 have this order: 14, 13, 15.
16a	Nash Papyrus has "Do not treat your neighbor worthlessly."
17a	Nash Papyrus and others have the word order switched around.
17b	Nash Papyrus has synonym for *chamad,* meaning the same.
17c	Reference to 17a inverted order.
17d	Nash Papyrus adds "or his field . . ."
17e	Sam. Pentateuch does not have waw-consecutive on these two words.
17f	LXX adds "or his land" from Deut 5:21.
17g	Sam. Pentateuch has additional material here.

See Wenham's "Word Biblical Commentary" on *Exodus* for additional translation notes on this section.

Appendix 2

Significant Word Counts in Exodus 20 and Related Passages

Words Occurring in Multiples of 5

Word	Translation	Text	Original Count	Logos Count
yahweh elohim	LORD (your) God	Ex 20	5	5
`abad	work (n, v)	"	5	2 (v) + 3 (n)
'elohim (alone as "God")	God; gods	"	10	10; Twice as "gods"
dabar	speak (v); what is spoken (n)	"	N/A	4 (v) + 1 (n)
'elohim (as "God")	God; gods	Ex 21–23	5	10; Thrice as "gods"
rē^{a}ʿ	neighbor	"	10	10
ganab	steal	"	5	5
yahweh alone	LORD	"	5	5
dabar	speak (v); what is spoken (n)	"	5	4 (n) + 1 (v)
`abad	work (n, v)	"	10	5 (v) + 7 (n)
'elohim	God; gods	Ex 34	5	5 (as "gods") 3 (as "God")
'erets	land	"	5	5

Words occurring in multiples of 7

Word	Translation	Text	Original Count	Logos Count
~~*'elohim*~~		~~Ex 20~~	~~7~~	Removed; see table above
~~*Yahweh*~~			~~7~~	Removed; see table above
`asah	make	Ex 21–23	7	8
`abad	work	"	N/A	5 (verb) + 7 (noun)
'erets/'adamah	land	Deut 5	7	7
'erets	land	Lev 19	7	7

In my original count in Wigram's in 1995, I counted *yahweh* or *yahweh 'elohim* in multiples of 8 in Exodus 20, Exodus 34, Leviticus 19, and Deuteronomy 5.

In the Logos search, *yahweh* appears nine times in Exodus 20 and fifteen times in Exodus 34.