

The Decalogue as a Charter of Rights and Entitlements

The Ten Commandments are the only part of the Bible written by God himself, not under inspiration but personally, when he descended in glory on Mount Sinai, after he had addressed his people there. Also known as the Decalogue or Ten Words, he inscribed them—not on papyrus, parchment, or fire-hardened clay, but into more enduring stone, most probably granite. The rest of Holy Writ was the work of inspired intermediaries. Even the words of Jesus during his Incarnation were recorded by the Gospel writers in Greek, translated from Aramaic, his and their mother tongue.

A close reading of the Ten Commandments provides unusual insights. Some of these concern the nature of God. People often miss them, being more struck by the words “you shall not” and, occasionally, “you shall.” These are the “do’s” and “don’ts” of the Law. In each case, it is, of course, a matter of obligation. But, underlying all of the commandments, there are also entitlements and rights, human as well as divine.

In Exodus 20, the primary record of when the Commandments were first spoken to the Israelites at Mount Sinai and afterwards written by the Almighty, the Lawgiver introduces himself by saying “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” This sentence has two functions. First it says who the Lawgiver is and then specifies that it is he who freed them from those who had so long enslaved them. That is, it both identifies him as the LORD and indicates why he is entitled to being each hearer’s legislator.

Do the Ten Commandments only apply to the ancient Israelites and modern Jews? No, for the Bible makes it plain that Christians, who have accepted Jesus the Messiah as their Lord and Saviour, must also keep and benefit by them. When the LORD called Abraham, he told him: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Centuries later, in New Testament times, Jesus said to a Samaritan woman whom he met at Jacob’s well: “Salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22), which the apostle Paul elaborated further when writing to the Gentile Christians in Galatia: “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). We must never forget that Jesus was and remains a Jew. And the word *Christ* is derived from *Christos*, the Greek translation for the *mashiach* (messiah). Both words mean the “anointed” one.

Very interesting, too, is the expression “the LORD your God.”

The word translated into English as LORD with its four capitalized letters is in Hebrew written as יהוה (YHWH) or (YHVH). These are only the consonants, for the Aleph-Beth used for writing the Tanakh—which we call the Old Testament—at first made limited use of vowel indicators. Only much later, between the 6th and the 10th centuries of our era, Jewish grammarians known as Massoretes invented a system of subscripts and superscripts to compensate for this lack.

It is plausible, even probable, that the vowels for יהוה (YHWH) are *a* and *e*, although no devout Jew will ever try to utter that holy name of God. Therefore, the Massoretes added to these consonants the vowels of a totally different word, *Adonai* (Lord). Why did they do this? It was to ensure that regardless of the consonants the reader would say “*Adonai*.” This is why we also refer to the Almighty as the LORD, capitalizing each of the letters. But at Sinai he spoke the Law before he wrote it. When he introduced himself, he would not have uttered only four consonants. Surely he said his name in full: “I am Yahweh, your God.” We should treat this name with utmost respect and not say it unnecessarily, though we are Christians and not bound by Massoretic restrictions. The most appropriate English translation is *the LORD*.

But in his introduction, just before uttering the Law, he also called himself “your God.” The Hebrew word for deity is *Elohim*, a remarkable word. It is both singular and plural. But it is also used to designate heathen gods, as in the first commandment: “You shall have no other *elohim* before me.”

Genesis 1, and the Bible itself, begins with an enigmatic statement: “In the beginning *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth.” The word describing the Deity is plainly plural, as indicated by the ending *-im*, but the verb “created” is, in Hebrew, singular. That is the pattern throughout the creation story. Wherever in this chapter the English translation gives “God said” or “God made,” the original has a plural *Elohim* with a singular verb.

In Gen. 1:26, we read: “Then God said: ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...’” So the *Elohim* really is/are a plurality! A similar instance of this is found in Gen. 11:7, where the Most High intervened because disobedient people were building the tower of Babel. He said: “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Does the word Us in this case also refer to the *Elohim*?

No, it does not. It is, instead, applied to the LORD, to YHWH. This word occurs four times in verses 5-9. It is YHWH who went down to see the city and the tower which these men were building. It is YHWH who said: “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language....” It is YHWH who confused their speech, and it is YHWH who from there “scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”

Throughout Genesis 1 and up to Gen. 2:3, creation is described as the work of the *Elohim*. Only after that we read: “This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens...” That is, YHWH *Elohim*. These are the two words uttered by the Most High when he introduced himself at the beginning of the Decalogue. But in the fourth commandment the expression YHWH *Elohim* is used interchangeably with YHWH. First we read that it is the Sabbath of YHWH *Elohim*. But where he refers back to the work of creation he does not, as in Genesis, attribute it to the *Elohim*. He says, instead: “For in six days the LORD (YHWH) made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them...” and “therefore the LORD (YHWH) blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (Ex. 20:11).

In his introductory words to the Law, the Most High at Sinai asserted that he had a right to legislate because he freed his people from bondage in Egypt. But now, in the fourth commandment, he makes a broader claim: he is the creator and owner of everything. Therefore, because he hallowed the seventh day by resting on it, he insists that his hearers and readers must do the same.

Centuries after Sinai, through the prophet Ezekiel, he stated that in observing the Sabbath his people obtain a knowledge through which YHWH makes them holy, too: “Moreover, I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them” (Eze. 20:12). How? “Hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God” (Eze. 20:20).

Let us now look at each of the Commandments at the rights and entitlements that the “do’s” and “don’ts” maintain and protect.

The first one says: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” To this the LORD YHWH is entitled because he has saved his people. But it is more than that. For the believer, salvation always precedes legislation. We do not strive to keep the Law in order to be saved, which is a vain endeavor. We are enabled to keep the Law because the LORD YHWH has already saved us. And this we do through Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

In the second Commandment, the LORD YHWH forbids the making of images and the bowing down to them in adoration. About this, he feels very strongly. We could almost say

ferociously, after we have read the commandment and consider that it was one of the two most important reasons for eliminating the northern state of ancient Israel in 721 B.C. The other was Sabbath desecration. The LORD regarded all the rulers of that state as evil men, because they persisted in worshiping the two golden calves set up by their first king, Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:28-31). With his edict, he pretended that these objects were the elohim who had brought them up from Egypt. But this the LORD will not tolerate. Making images and adoring them leads to syncretism, which adds other gods to the worship of YHWH. But the Commandment says he is a jealous God who demands exclusive worship. The Jews who inhabited the southern state of Judah were later sent into a seventy-year Babylonian exile for similar reasons.

The third Commandment says that the name of the LORD YHWH should not be used in vain and threatens or at least implies punishment for those who ignore this injunction. For pious Jews this means that the word YHWH should be avoided. Some of them treat the word *God* with similar reverence and write it as *G-d*. In this, too, we Christians can learn from them. All names applied to the Most High should be used with reverent care and sparingly, even when we pray. The LORD is an awesome being. But more is involved. He is dishonored and his name is used in vain when people attribute to him all manner of disasters or nastiness that befall them, saying: "It is God's will!" Often they bring suffering on themselves through disobedience to his commandments or the laws of health and then impute the consequences to him. Some human beings are quick to say that great calamities like destructive hurricanes are derived from him or are at least his will. Now, it is true that for reasons not always apparent to us he allows such evils to happen, but they may well have been unleashed by the evil one. We can read about this in the book of Job. Another way of using the LORD's name in vain is to profess that we serve him while our deeds belie our words. For instance, a man may say that he is a born-again Christian and yet in his business dealings ill-treat, defraud, or exploit a fellow human being. Unbelievers who observe such evil are inclined to mock him as well as his religion. This greatly dishonors the name of our loving LORD.

We have already referred to the fourth Commandment. Let us emphasize again that its claims are universal, for in it the LORD our God is depicted as the creator of heaven and earth. Therefore, it applies not only to Israelites or Jews, but also the "stranger who is within your gates" (Exodus 20:8), that is, gentiles. In the book of Isaiah, the gospel prophet, we read about the LORD's acceptance of and blessings for those of them who decide to serve him: "Also the sons of the foreigner / Who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, / And to love the name of the / LORD, to be His servants— / Everyone who keeps from / defiling the Sabbath, / And holds fast My covenant... / For My house shall be called a / house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:6, 7). But why is this Commandment introduced with the words "*Remember* the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"? Because the LORD at Sinai already knew that future generations would be prone to be neglectful of keeping the seventh day. Also that centuries later an impious power, the Roman Antichrist, would blasphemously "speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law..." (Daniel 7:25, RSV). As a consequence, since the European Middle Ages, almost the whole world has been forgetting the Sabbath and is perpetuating the observance of Sunday, the first day of the week. Every seven days, it desecrates the LORD's holy day. Yet he has not forgotten it, and at the end of time a faithful remnant of Christians will "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

The first four of the Ten Commandments deal with people's relationship to God, which has to be both dutiful and loving. In the context of their obedience to the Decalogue, Moses

said: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4, 5). To this day, observant Jews quote these words as their basic profession of faith. During his incarnation, the LORD quoted these very words when a learned scribe asked him: “Which is the first commandment of all?” (Mark 12:28-33), to which Jesus added: “And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” This was another quotation from what Moses had written in Leviticus 19:18. In another version of this meeting with that Jewish lawyer, he concluded by saying: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40).

It is to be observed that, despite the word *remember*, all four of the Ten Commandments require those who serve the true God not to do something but to avoid doing something. They have to refrain from the worship of other gods, the creation of and bowing down to idols, using the LORD name in vain, and the performance of secular work on the Sabbath. Instead, they are required to serve only him in the way that he requires, without ‘graven images’ allegedly representing him or anything else, revere his name, and rest on his Sabbath.

This is what he wants and is entitled to because he has made and redeemed us.

The last six precepts of the Decalogue deal with our relationship to our fellow human beings. Each of them is concerned with something they are entitled to, a specific right bestowed on them by the LORD God who made us all. Let us now briefly look at each of them.

The fifth Commandment says: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). These words simultaneously promise longevity for those who obey and imply a threat that the life may be cut short of anybody who disobeys. If the order in which Commandments is given, indicates their relative importance, honoring one’s parents is more important than refraining from murder or adultery. Execution was mandated for three offenses against them: “He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 21:15), “He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 21:17), and the elders, if requested by exasperated parents, had to stone to death a stubbornly disobedient and rebellious son (Deut. 21:18). Further, it was clearly understood that honoring one’s father and mother entailed a great deal more than a courteous, respectful attitude. Children also had to care for their material needs. In Mark 7:7-13, Jesus dealt with this when he sharply criticized the Scribes and Pharisees who exalted their traditions above the Law of God and quoted Moses as their authority for doing so. He quoted the fifth Commandment as well as the words “He who curses father or mother let him be put to death,” and then went on to reject their doctrine of Corban. According to that, a man could elude his obligation to care for his parents by saying this word, which means “it is a gift of God.” Almost fifteen hundred years later, Hans Luther, Martin Luther’s father, likewise upbraided his son for becoming a monk and a priest instead of caring for his parents in their old age. Martin responded that he had been called by a voice from heaven out of the thunder cloud, to which old Hans retorted: “God grant it was not an apparition of the Devil.” (Robert H. Bainton, *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther*; Abingdon Press, New York, Nashville, 1950, 43, 44). This Commandment safeguards the rights of parents, of the mother equally with those of the father.

The sixth Commandment has been variously translated as “Thou shalt not kill,” A.V., and “You shall not murder,” NKJV. The latter version is more in harmony with the fact that in various Scriptures. For instance, in the Decalogue itself, the LORD commanded execution for

various offenses. He also ordered the Israelites who invaded Canaan to exterminate the Canaanites. During his incarnation, when he amplified the Law in his Sermon on the Mount, he said that wrongful anger against another human being broke this precept and could be punished (Matthew 5:22). Innocent people are endowed by the creator with a right to be alive, which is strictly protected by the sixth Commandment.

The seventh Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” guards the happiness and rights of the individual. Together with the fifth, it also upholds the integrity of the family as instituted in the beginning. In Old Testament times, breaking this Commandment was punishable by death. That is how odious it is to God. The Lord Jesus said that even lusting after a woman to whom one is not married constitutes adultery (Matthew 5:28).

The eighth Commandment against stealing also covers much that does not immediately meet the eye. For the individual, it includes—as is generally recognized—intellectual theft: the deliberate violation of somebody else’s patent or copyright. But governments can also steal, for instance by appropriating a person’s or family’s property without compensation. This is what the Communist Soviet Union did with horrible consequences for those whom it robbed and even murdered, yet without any real benefit to the regime. Such was also what Robert Mugabe did in Zimbabwe... and utterly ruined the economy of his country. Wars of conquest is another form of stealing. Owning private property is a fundamental human right and necessary for economic success. The breaking of this Commandment was punishable, in Biblical times, by restitution. The thief had to return considerably more than he had stolen; for instance, five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep (Exodus 22:1). After Zacchaeus, an extortionate chief tax collector, had accepted Christ, he declared: “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything by false accusation, I restore fourfold” (Luke 19:8). But thieves were never executed or even imprisoned. This contrasts sharply with punishment in other societies. For example, in eighteenth century England pickpockets were hanged and so were poor people for stealing food. Horse theft was deemed an especially serious crime. In America, it was punishable by hanging until late in the nineteenth century. Even nowadays, Islamic countries like Saudi-Arabia and Iran chop off the hands of thieves.

The ninth Commandment with its prohibition of bearing false witness against one’s neighbor is easily misunderstood. It does not simplistically forbid lying but has several layers of meaning. Most obviously it has an application in legal proceedings. In ancient Israel, it was judicially dealt with in a most effective and interesting way. A false witness had to undergo the same punishment as would have been incurred by the person against whom he or she uttered lying testimony. “The judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother...” (Deuteronomy 19:18, 19). This included the death penalty (vs. 21). In the court proceedings of the LORD’s ancient people, very great care was exercised to ensure that justice was done. For instance, two or three witnesses were necessary for conviction (Deuteronomy 19:15). This contrasts sharply with modern court proceedings in which a person on trial for murder can be convicted on tenuous evidence. But the ninth Commandment is also directed against slander, harmful gossip, and undermining other people’s reputation. In other words, it safeguards the good name of one’s neighbor.

The tenth Commandment prohibits coveting anything or anybody that belongs to another person, though not, as some will have it, desire. For instance, it is perfectly legitimate for a man to want a beautiful car, house, or other possession, a talented employee, or a lovely

woman to marry. But if any of these already belong to somebody else they must, even in one's thoughts, be left alone. For example, somebody else's car or house is not to be coveted if they are not for sale. Another person's spouse is obviously out of bounds. So why is covetousness, as an act of the mind, a sin? Because it is the first step towards ugly acts like theft, armed robbery, or murder. This Commandment is another protection of a fundamental human right.

Each precept of God's Law, despite its predominantly negative wording of do's and don'ts, is aimed at the positive safeguarding of divine or human rights. And for people these are reciprocal. When both my neighbor and I observe the Commandments given by the LORD to regulate human conduct, we mutually protect each other. As already stated above, the Decalogue is grounded in love, towards God and humankind. In pondering the dealings of the LORD, an ancient psalmist also wrote: "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed together" (Psalm 85:10, A.V.).