

23. The Ten Commandments

The Decalogue, popularly called the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1-17, has been recognized as interpolated in Exodus.¹ It is not difficult to see why. Here it is, in context, with key phrases **emphasized**:

[Exod 19:16] And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were **thunders** and lightnings, and a thick **cloud** upon the mount, and the voice of a **trumpet** exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. [17] And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the nether part of the mount. [18] And mount Sinai, the whole of it, **smoked**, because Yahweh descended upon it in **fire**; and the **smoke** thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount **quaked** greatly. [19] And when the voice of the **trumpet** waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice. [20] And Yahweh came down upon mount Sinai, to the top of the mount, and Yahweh **called Moses** to the top of the mount. . . . [23] And Moses said unto Yahweh, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai, for thou didst charge us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it. [24] And Yahweh said unto him, Go, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou and Aaron with thee; but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto Yahweh, lest he break forth upon them. [25] So Moses went down unto the people, and told them.

[20:1] *And god spake all these words, saying, [2] I am Yahweh, thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. [3] Thou shalt have no other gods before me. [4] Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any likeness . . . [17] Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.*

[18] And all the people perceived the **thunderings**, and the **lightnings**, and the voice of the **trumpet**, and the mountain **smoking**; and when the people saw it, they trembled, and stood afar off. [19] And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear, but **let not God speak with us**, lest we die. [20] And Moses said unto the people, Fear not, for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before you, that ye sin not. [21] And the people stood **afar off**, and **Moses drew near** unto the thick **darkness** where God was.

The passages on both sides are consecutive, as the emphasized phrases help to show. Those phrases *do not appear* in the Decalogue portion of the chapter. Lack of literary continuity between a passage and its surroundings is the classic evidence for interpolation. The Decalogue is then a later addition to Exodus 20.

¹Thus McNeile (1917) 114, "must have been inserted;" Rylaarsdam (1952) 842, "give the impression of having been inserted;" Noth (1959; tr 1962) "loosely joined to the . . . theophany;" Stalker (1962) 227, "its insertion here breaks the clear original connection between 19:17 and 20:18;" Brueggemann (1994) 839, "Originally not connected to the theophany."

When was it added? It is absent in the first Exodus Code (Exod 21-31), but had appeared by the time of the rewritten Code (Exod 33-40), since Exod 34:28 has Moses writing the “ten commandments” he had received from Yahweh on the mountain. Then it was interpolated into the First Code sometime before the Second Code was written. The sequence is:

Exod 20-31 > *Exod 20:1-17 (Decalogue) > Exod 33-40

True to the “Temple” character of the Second Exodus Code (§25) which lavishes most of its time on the details of the Tabernacle and its furnishings, Yahweh’s words to Moses on the mountain, as quoted in Exod 34, allude only to the God parts of the Decalogue, and among them, only to the First (no other gods, 20:3), Third (no images, 20:4-7, perhaps referring to the golden calf episode in Exod 32), and Fourth (“remember the Sabbath,” 20:8). For the *ethical* prescriptions of the Decalogue, we must go to the Exodus 20 version.

Antecedent. There is no credible trace of an earlier source. Nine of the ten rules can be found in Lev 19:9-18, but not in Exodus order, and mixed with material from Exod 21-23, the Covenant Code. Lev 19 is therefore secondary.² Bottom line: we do not know where the Decalogue came from.

Character. The last six Decalogue rules are briefly stated; the first four, the God four, are *argued*. The Exodus Decalogue may then be a Yahweh takeover of an earlier six-item civil code.³ Several late Biblical passages show an ethical rather than a sacrificial sense,⁴ implying that ethics itself is late. But perhaps ethics was always there, as the mutual understanding of a community. Not a pastoral community, but a residential one, such as that of Canaan .

If so, what were the rules of that community? They protect four things:

- The family (#5, honor father and mother; #7, do not commit adultery)
- Life (#6, do not kill)
- Property (#8, do not steal, #10, do not covet)
- Legal due process (#9, do not bear false witness)

The family, the basic structure in all societies, is here safeguarded vertically (obedience of sons) and laterally (fidelity in marriage). Existence is peaceful, with security of persons (do not kill) and property (do not steal, do not covet). Judgements are rendered, not by parents, but by judges; in the simplest form, the judges would be clan or community elders (do not bear false witness), but there would be a point of reference; the judges are limited by the law.

Every society consists largely of an understanding *not to do* certain things. The above is not a bad attempt at a basic list of things not to do.

²See Wenham **Leviticus** 262-264, and for a further suggestion, §24.

³This possibility is hinted at in Tappy **Lineage** 175, “This study treats the latter half of the Decalogue (Exod 20:12-17 / Deut 5:16-21) as a vestige of old lineage law . . .”

⁴For seven such passages, see §65.

Exodus and Deuteronomy

The Decalogue recurs in Deuteronomy 5, almost verbatim, but not quite. The beginning (Exod 20:2-6) is identical. Then we begin to see variations:

<i>Exodus 20</i>	<i>Deuteronomy 5</i>
[7] Thou shalt not take the name of Yahweh thy God in vain; for Yahweh will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.	
Remember	Observe
[8] The Sabbath day, to keep it holy. [9] Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work; [10] but the seventh day is a sabbath unto Yahweh thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor	
thy cattle	thine ox, nor thine ass,
nor the stranger that is within thy gates, [11]	nor any of thy cattle,
	that thy man-servant and thy maid-servant may rest as well as thou.⁵
for in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.⁶	And thou shalt remember that thou wast a servant in the land, and Yahweh thy God brought thee out thence by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm, therefore Yahweh thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.
[12] Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which Yahweh thy God giveth thee. [13] Thou shalt not kill. [14] Thou shalt not ⁷ commit adultery. [15] Thou shalt not steal. [16] Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. [17] Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's	
house, thou shalt not covet	wife, neither shalt thou desire
thy neighbor's	
wife,	house, his field,
nor ⁸ his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.	

So far Exodus. In Deuteronomy, we will see the Decalogue Code as the ground plan for the reformulation of all earlier laws (§35). In that role, the Decalogue is no longer an isolated *statement* of law; it becomes something more nearly approaching a *philosophy* of law.

⁵This socially inclusive note – also the servants – is an important addition to Deut.

⁶Note the contrast: Exodus alludes to the creation in seven days alluding to Gen 1; Deuteronomy, God's power in bringing the people out of Egypt, the Exodus story.

⁷Here and below, Deut has "Neither shalt thou."

⁸Here and below, Deut has "or."