Exodus

Lesson #10

"The Law"

(Exodus 20: 1-26)

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Review

In Lesson #9 the Israelites reach Mt. Sinai, and at Mt. Sinai in a terrifying pyrotechnic display of awesome power, God commands the Israelites to prepare to meet him, at which time he will speak to them *audibly* from within the smoke, fire and thunder of Mt. Sinai.

When God speaks he reaffirms the covenant with the Israelites, the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

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Review, cont.

In Lesson #9 we also learned that a covenant is a pact, treaty or binding legal agreement between two parties. In addition, we learned that such covenants were commonplace between sovereigns and vassals in the ancient Near East and that typically they had a 6-part standardized form:

1. **Preamble, or introduction of the speaker;**
2. **Historical prologue;**
3. **Stipulations;**
4. **The document;**
5. **The gods as witnesses; and**
6. **Blessings and curses**

The Torah *as a whole* (Genesis through Deuteronomy) is the fullest expression of God's covenant with the Israelites.

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Preview

In Lesson #10, we learn that the covenant God reaffirms with the Israelites now expands to include a set of *moral and ethical principles* that will govern the Israelites' behavior in their relationship with God and with one another: the "Ten Commandments," or the "Decalogue."

In Lesson #10 we will examine the "Ten Commandments" in detail.

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The Ten Commandments, **produced and directed by Cecil B. DeMille. Paramount Pictures, 1956.**

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Every society, ancient or modern, must have a set of laws governing moral and ethical behavior, if that society is to survive.

- In ancient pre-literate societies, such laws may be embodied in long-established cultural norms passed on orally from generation to generation, often in stories designed to teach such cultural norms and behavioral expectations.
- In more complex, literate societies, such laws may be codified and written down, accompanied by a judicial system to ensure compliance.

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The ancient Near East produced numerous examples of such written laws, many of which predate the Exodus story.

- **The Code of Ur-Nammu**, king of Ur (Abraham's home town), the oldest known law code, written in Mesopotamia on tablets in the Sumerian language, c. 2100-2050 B.C., the time of Abraham.
- **The Laws of Eshnunna** (a settlement north of Ur on the Tigris River), two cuneiform tablets discovered at Tel Abū Harmai in Bagdad, Iraq, dating from c. 1930 B.C.
- **The Code of Lipit-Ishtar**, fifth ruler of the first dynasty of Isin (a city-state in lower Mesopotamia), c. 1870 B.C.
- **The Code of Hammurabi**, the Babylonian law code of ancient Mesopotamia, dating to c. 1772 B.C., the most well-known of the ancient law codes.

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The Code of Hammurabi

The Code of Hammurabi (diorite stele), c. 1772 B.C.
Louvre Museum, Paris.
[Close-up of inscriptions. Credit: Getty Images.]

Inscribed in the Akkadian language in cuneiform script, the code of Hammurabi consists of 282 laws:

- **Nearly 1/2 of the Code addresses contractual law;**
- **About 1/3 of the Code addresses household and family relationships, including sexual behavior; and**
- **The rest addresses judicial and military issues.**

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Hammurabi, 6th ruler of the Amorite dynasty of Babylon, c. 1750. Louvre Museum, Paris.

Such ancient legal codes are typically the end result of codified cultural norms handed down by a political ruler, usually a king, written on clay or stone tablets.

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The "Ten Commandments" are exceptional, in that they are not the result of codified cultural norms handed down by a political ruler; rather, they are given *directly by God*.

Rembrandt. *Moses Smashing the Tablets of the Law* (oil on canvas), 1659. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

"The Lord gave me the two stone tablets inscribed, by God's own finger, with a copy of all the words that the Lord spoke to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly."

(Deuteronomy 9: 10)

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With the "Ten Commandments" God becomes the moral and ethical arbiter of human behavior—something no other god in ancient polytheistic cultures has done, *nor is it something the God of the Bible has done up to this point*.

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The gods of ancient polytheistic societies concern themselves, for the most part, with managing creation as solar, agrarian or reproductive agents:

- **Ra, the sun god;**
- **Kephri, the subsidiary solar god who moves the sun across the sky;**
- **Heqet, the divine midwife, bringing life into the world;**
- **Geb, the god of the earth;**
- **Nut, the goddess of the sky;**
- **Osiris, the god of the underworld, and so on.**

Moral and ethical concerns, as Jack Miles observes in *God: a Biography*, are typically assigned "to a rather impersonal necessity of some kind of whose workings favor morality and affect both gods and men alike."

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Until Exodus 20 God has shown little sustained interest in either morality or ethics.

- God's command to Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is less a moral or ethical demand than it is a condition of a prelapsarian paradise in which morality and ethics are unnecessary.
- God does prohibit bloodshed after Cain murders Abel, and after the flood he expands the prohibition, but generally speaking, throughout Genesis God is more concerned with establishing Abraham's line of succession than with morality and ethics.
- There are, of course, laws and customs in the Near Eastern culture that the patriarchs observe (e.g., the "bride price," laws for purchasing land, the relationship between a wife and her husband's servants, and so on), but observance of the laws and customs has no material affect on the patriarchs' relationship with God.

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After Exodus 20, all that changes. Morality and ethics become the *central focus* of the relationship between God and the Israelites.

There is no mistaking its importance. The solemnity of the scene at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19, accompanied by the awesome and terrifying display of God's power, establishes the primacy of God's Law in his relationship with the Israelites, as well as God's absolute moral and ethical authority.

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After God gives the "Ten Commandments" in Exodus 20 and illustrates how to apply them in Exodus 21-23, the people undergo a blood ritual in 24: 1-14, a profoundly disturbing scene that seals the covenant, leaving an indelible imprint of the Law's significance and seriousness.

"Moses then wrote down all the words of the Lord and, rising early in the morning, he built at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve sacred stones for the twelve tribes if Israel. Then having sent young men of the Israelites to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice young bulls as communion offerings to the Lord, Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, 'All that the Lord has said, we will hear and do.' Then he took the blood and splashed it on the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words" **(21: 4-8).**

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The "Ten Commandments"

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

(Exodus 20: 1)

Notice that, in the pattern of the 6-part covenant form, God first identifies himself as the speaker (*"I am the Lord your God"*), and then he gives a brief "historical prologue," recalling what he has done for the Israelites in the past (*"who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"*).

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Next, God moves to the "stipulations"

Robert Alter insightfully observes that the formulation of the ten commandments "is, in the most literal sense, lapidary—terse enough to be carved in stone," leading many scholars suggest that the commandments as we have them in our text incorporate later explanatory glosses or elaborations on the original expressions, suggesting an original list something like this:

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The Ten Commandments

1. You shall have no other gods beside me.
2. You shall make no carved images.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bear false witness.
10. Do not covet.

Indeed, in Hebrew, commandments 6, 7 & 8 are only two words of three syllables each!

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Such a brief list of terse commands contrasts sharply, for example, with the 282 laws in the Code of Hammurabi, addressing contractual, domestic, judicial and military issues.

The "Ten Commandments" are not intended as "laws" *per se*; rather, they are ten *principles* by which a covenant people is to live with God and one another, the first four commandments addressing God and the last six addressing social relationships.

These ten principles will then be applied to individual cases, generating 613 *specific* laws that will punctuate the Torah, as we progress from Exodus through Deuteronomy.

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By analogy . . .

The Ten Commandments are to the Torah,

What the U.S. Constitution is to municipal case law.

So, let's investigate the "Ten Commandments."

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The Ten Commandments

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3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
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9. Do not bear false witness.
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You shall have no other gods beside me.

- **Each of the "Ten Commandments" is stated in the 2nd person singular, indicating that each commandment is addressed not to the Israelites as a group, but to *each individual person* in Israel.**

- **In the 1st commandment God is not saying that he is the *only* god. In a polytheistic world the reality of other gods was unquestioned; indeed, YHWH declares war on the Egyptian gods, defeating each and every one of them, demonstrating that he is superior to all the Egyptian gods and that he will not share his position or his people with any of them.**

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The Ten Commandments

1. You shall have no other gods beside me.
2. **You shall make no carved images.**
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bear false witness.
10. Do not covet.

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"You shall make no carved images of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or serve them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their ancestors' wickedness on the children of those who hate me down to the third and fourth generation; but showing love down to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (20: 3-6).

- **The "heavens above, earth below and waters beneath" are the three realms of the biblical world view; we first encountered them in Genesis 1, the creation story.**
- **The Hebrew word *qana'* can mean "jealous," "zealous" or "ardent." The ancient world viewed in strongly anthropomorphic terms the revolutionary idea of one god uniting all three realms: heavens, earth and waters. "Jealous," therefore, is probably the sense here: God will brook no rival in the hearts and minds of his covenant people.**

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"You shall make no carved images of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or serve them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their ancestors' wickedness on the children of (those who hate me) down to the third and fourth generation; but showing love down to the thousandth generation of (those who love me) and keep my commandments" (20: 3-6).

•In Deuteronomy 24: 16 we are told explicitly that God does not punish the children for the sins of their parents, nor the parents for the sins of their children. Here, the qualifier is "those who hate me" and "those who love me," recognizing that a person who "hates" God will affect the attitudes and behavior of his descendants "to the third and fourth generation," but those who "love" God and keep his commandments will have a lasting influence on the attitudes and behavior of a thousand generations. God will rightly punish those who "hate" him and love those who "love" him, but who hates him and who loves him is a function of the attitudes and behavior of previous generations.

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The Ten Commandments

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2. You shall make no carved images.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
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"You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain, for the Lord will not leave unpunished anyone who invokes his name in vain."

- The Hebrew verb translated "in vain" has the primary sense of taking an "oath" or "vow," as well as the sense of using God's name "falsely." The principle recognizes the ineffable holiness of God's name, a name that embodies the nature and very essence of who God is. His "name," therefore, should not be uttered apart from direct reference to who he is.

Using God's name as part of a oath or vow, using it lightly or—even worse—using it as part of a curse is presumptuous, insulting and in blatant disobedience to God's command.

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The Ten Commandments

1. You shall have no other gods beside me.
2. You shall make no carved images.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. **Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.**
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bear false witness.
10. Do not covet.

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“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, either you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your work animal, or the resident alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the erth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

The first four commandments focus on the covenant community’s relationship with God; the last six on the community’s relationships with one another.

The 4th commandment—“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”—is the only commandment regarding ritual. As God rested on the seventh day after six days of creation, so must we, who are created in the image of God, rest on the seventh day from all the work we do. There are two reasons for this: 1) God commanded it, therefore we do it, thus honoring God; and 2) humanity should not be slaves to anything, including work.

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The Ten Commandments

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3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
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"Honor your father and mother, that you may have a long life in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

- As Ephesians 6: 2 notes: *"'Honor your father and mother.' This is the first commandment with a promise, 'that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life on earth.'"*

- The 6th commandment is the first that addresses the covenant community's relationships with one another: honoring the human man and woman who brought you into the world is one's primary obligation in the social order. It is also the only commandment in which "no" or "not" does not appear. Human nature is fraught with impulses that must be resisted. As God said to Cain: *". . . sin lies in wait at the door; its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it"* (Genesis 4: 7); hence, the Law is filled with prohibitions. As the great medieval rabbi Maimonides observed, of the 613 specific laws in the Torah, 365 of them are negative, involving "thou shalt not."

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The Ten Commandments

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“Do not murder.”

The Hebrew verb *retzach* in the 6th commandment has a wide range of meaning in Scripture including: to “break,” to “smash,” and to “slay,” “kill” and “murder.” Context determines how *retzach* is translated. In the context of the Ten Commandments *retzach* refers to:

“The unlawful, premeditated taking of another person’s life.”

It does *not* refer to judicial killing, killing in warfare, killing in self defense or the killing of animals, all of which are permitted in Scripture under the proper circumstances.

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The Ten Commandments

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2. You shall make no carved images.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
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5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
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“Do not commit adultery.”

As the family unit is the core of God’s covenant community, the seventh commandment protects the family’s integrity and wholeness. As a fundamental act of betrayal, adultery shatters the family unit. Placing the prohibition against adultery after murder suggests the seriousness of the act, for adultery is the unlawful, premeditated act of destroying a family.

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The Ten Commandments

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2. You shall make no carved images.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
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“Do not steal.”

As adultery compromises the integrity and unity of a family, so does stealing compromise the integrity and unity of a community. Unlawfully taking what rightfully belongs to another sows distrust among community members, weakening the social fabric and planting the seeds of revenge.

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The Ten Commandments

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5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bear false witness.
10. Do not covet.

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“Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Commandment #9 addresses not only perjury in a judicial sense, but also malicious gossip which, like stealing, compromises the integrity and unity of a community, while sowing distrust and discord within the community.

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The Ten Commandments

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3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
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"Do not covet yourneighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his male or female slave, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

The Hebrew verb *hamad* spans a wide range of meaning, from "to yearn for," "desire," "lust after" or simply "to want." In the Ten Commandments *hamad* clearly refers to wanting something that belongs to another person, so the venerable King James translation rightly renders the word "covet."

This is the only commandment that legislates *desire*, rather than action, recognizing that wanting what someone else has lies at the heart of much illicit behavior, from adultery to stealing to bearing false witness.

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. In Genesis God walks in the garden with Adam & Eve, he has dinner and a debate over Sodom and Gomorrah with Abraham, and he visits Joseph intimately in dreams. In Exodus God bursts on the scene as a hardened warrior and law-giver. How do you explain this change?
2. A written code of laws is not unique to the Bible. What other written codes are there in the ancient Near East that predate Exodus?
3. What is the difference between those codes and the code given in Exodus?
4. Why are the "Ten Commandments" so brief?
5. The "Ten Commandments" are divided into two parts. What are they?

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