

## Bible Study # 33 Exodus 20.1–7 03–16–2021

This section is crucial, since it sets out the constitutional charter for Israel, the nation committed to the Lord by his personal choice. In 24:7, reference is made to ‘the book of the covenant’, and this seems to be a term that includes chapter 19, the giving of the Decalogue, and the application of it that follows (20:22–23:33).

Clearly these two sections belong together, as they constitute two aspects of the same legal framework. The first, the Decalogue, contains the prescriptive law, while the section that follows is the descriptive version. In the one, there are direct instructions (‘you shall/shall not ...’), while the other contains case law (‘when/if ...’). Several facts about these covenantal requirements are important.

The pattern exhibited in the Mosaic covenant is similar to many extra-biblical treaties from the Ancient Near East. The pattern observable in Exodus, and in the renewals of this covenant made on either side of the Jordan (Deut. 29–30 and Josh. 24) show a correspondence with those from the second millennium b.c.

The pattern of these treaties (preamble, historical prologue, stipulations, curses and blessings, and oath) is reflected here in the Decalogue as it is in the renewal of the covenant forty years later, as described in Deuteronomy.

The intent of the Decalogue was not to introduce new ways of thinking about God and his demands on men. Rather, the principles underlying the Decalogue can be seen in the narratives in Genesis since their substance had been part of God’s law from the beginning. To take the case of the Sabbath, it was clearly known and practiced prior to the instructions concerning it given at Sinai (Exod. 20:8-11; 23:12).

God had blessed the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3), the week of seven days was understood (Gen. 29:27), and the Sabbath observed during the early wilderness experience (Exod. 16:22-30). It is clear that the covenant at Sinai was made in fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham (Exod. 2:24; 3:16-17). The same sovereign administration of grace prevailed as in the Abrahamic covenant (and its renewals to Isaac and Jacob).

The setting of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 is against the background of the redemption from Egypt. Its opening words, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage’, summarizes the narrative about God’s redemption of Israel already narrated in earlier chapters of this book. The redemption was an expression of God’s love for Israel (Deut. 7:8).

A corollary of the previous point is that the new aspects of the relation between God and Israel expressed in the Sinai covenant did not depend on obedience by Israel of God’s demands. Israel’s privileged position was based on God’s grace, not upon works.

The so-called ‘Ten Commandments’ are never referred to in that way in the Hebrew text. They are called ‘the ten words’ (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), and in two passages the implication is that they are equivalent to ‘covenant’. The English term, ‘Decalogue’, has come into English from Greek and Latin, and is an accurate reflection of the Hebrew expression.

This point is significant, as the Decalogue does not equate to modern legal codes. It lacks the detail and the penalties that we associate with our laws. Rather, the Decalogue belongs to the broader concept of covenant. In the discussion that follows, if the ten parts of the Decalogue are being referred to they will be designated by the use of a capital ‘W’ – Word(s).

Expressions used in the biblical text make explicit the link between the Decalogue and God’s covenant with Israel. It is called ‘testimony’ (Exod. 25:16, 21; 40:20; cf. 2 Kings 17:15), while the tablets on which it was

written are called ‘the tablets of the covenant’ (Deut. 9:9, 11, 15), or ‘the tablets of the testimony’ (Exod. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29), or even ‘the covenant’ (1 Kings 8:21).

The ark in which the tablets were placed is called either ‘the ark of the covenant’ or ‘the ark of the testimony’. The manner in which the Decalogue was given emphasized its significance. It was given through Moses as the covenantal mediator (Exod. 21:1; Deut. 5:31; 6:1), and the law was written with ‘the finger of God’ (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10).

This was a recognition that the source of the law was God Himself, just as the magicians in Egypt had recognized that the plague of insects had come by ‘the finger of God’ (Exod. 8:19). Nowhere in the Old Testament is any indication given as to how the Ten Words are to be divided, nor is there a biblical reference in either the Old or New Testament which says identifies any one of the commandments by number.

Three different systems are in operation. 1. The Protestants and Greek Catholics follow Josephus (Antiquities iii.5.5) in making verse 2 the preface and then it is followed by the Ten Words. On this enumeration exclusive worship of God is separated from the prohibition of idolatry.

2. Roman Catholics and Lutherans combine the first two Words together, and then, in order to get back to the number ten, divide the tenth Word into two, separating covetousness of a neighbor’s house from coveting a neighbor’s wife and property.

3. Jewish scholars, from soon after the New Testament era, combined the so-called ‘preface’ with verse 3, the prohibition of worshipping any other God but the Lord. From that point the order follows the normal Protestant order. I will follow system 3 which I believe captures things the best. Just remember that there are these differing number systems when you are talking to other Christians.

I remember a lady coming to see me one time who was extremely unhappy with Billy Graham because he didn’t know his commandments. I pointed out to her that he did, but just used a different numbering system that we did as Lutherans.

The biblical text never suggests that verse 2, the ‘preface’, is not part of the Ten Words. Hence, it makes good sense to combine it with the traditional first word. The combined Word identifies the Lord as the redeemer God and then links this with His claim to exclusive worship.

The final verse of chapter 19 simply indicates that Moses fulfilled his commission, delivering the Lord’s message for the people. However, it is important as it provides the link between the account of Moses’ reception of the Ten Words and the actual transmission of them according to the divine instructions.

**1. The First Word (20:1-3)** This section commences with the simple note that God spoke ‘all these words’, that is, the ‘Words’ that follow. This is important, as it points to the fact that God did not leave his people without clear revelation concerning both His character and His demands on his redeemed people.

Earlier, God had declared more than once that he was the Lord, the gracious God of the covenant (see 6:2, 6-8; 12:12). On stating in this formal way his demands on his children, he joined that declaration with his redemptive purposes expressed in bringing his people, Israel, out of bondage to the Egyptians.

Having experienced this deliverance, Israel should readily acknowledge that his victory over the gods of Egypt indeed demonstrated that he was the only God (12:12). To him exclusive honor and obedience was due. The God who claimed to be their God (‘I am the Lord your God’) could not permit worship of any alien god. He could not be replaced with a substitute.

While other Near East communities had many gods, Israel had only one who was radically different from idols (Ps. 115:1-8). The God of redeeming grace claimed exclusive worship from His servants. The whole subject of idolatry and the uniqueness of the living God is expanded in Deuteronomy 4:15-31, and restated and forcefully presented by prophets such as Isaiah (cf. 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 45:5-6, 18-22; 46:9).

The Shema, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deut. 6:4), was another restatement of God's uniqueness. The final words in this Word, 'before me', or 'beside me', are an additional reason that should impel obedience to this command. The Lord's honor would be offended if any other objects of worship were set by his side.

**2. The Second Word (20:4-6)** The Second Word does not forbid all forms of art, but only the use of human artistic skills to create either an image of God, or an idol that resembles anything of the created order, whether in the skies ('in heaven above'), on earth ('that is in the earth beneath'), or in the seas ('in the water under the earth').

The danger, if there was a representation of God, was that the image could be used as a magical token to try and manipulate events. This image would then in effect become a second 'god'. The expansion of this instruction in Deuteronomy starts with the premise that the people did not see a form when God spoke to them at Horeb. Therefore, there could be no visual representation of God, either male or female.

Also, animals and the heavenly bodies were themselves created, and they could not provide a model for making an idol (Deut. 4:15-31). If such images were made or they came across them among the surrounding peoples, no one in Israel should prostrate themselves before them or vow allegiance to them. Their pledge of servitude was to the Lord alone.

This Word had two reasons attached to it. The first related to God's character, while the second took into consideration the threats and promises that he made. The word used here for 'jealousy' is most frequently used in the Old Testament of jealousy within marriage. God is the jealous husband who will not tolerate His bride, Israel, entering into a relationship with another so-called god.

The threat was that those who hated the Lord would be punished, as would their descendants, down to the third and fourth generations. To the opposite class, those who showed genuine heartfelt love to the Lord and obeyed his commands, covenantal love towards them would be continued indefinitely.

The older translation of this command used the expression 'to thousands'. This meant that there was an inconsistency in translation, for neither in verse 5 or verse 6 does the word 'generation' occur. Either it should be in both or in neither. Deuteronomy 7:9 helps at this point, because it echoes the same promise and specifically mentions that God keeps His covenant 'to a thousand generations'.

The contrast ('to the third and fourth generation ... to the thousandth generation') highlights the abounding love and grace that God shows to His people who love and obey Him.

**3. The Third Word (20:7)** The Third Word speaks of not taking the Lord's name in vain. The Hebrew verb 'to take' is never used elsewhere in reference to speech. It means to bear or to carry, and here its object is 'the name of the Lord'. To carry his name meant to carry his character or reputation. The way Israel could bear God's name was living as the people of God, showing by imitation of him that they were a people of holiness.

The adverbial phrase 'in vain' probably means something like 'hypocritically'. There could be no hypocrisy in his service. The covenantal curse was expressed against anyone who was living a false profession, for such a person would stand guilty before God.

We will continue our study of the 10 Words tomorrow by examining 20.8-21.