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Ten Commandments, Two Tablets: The Shape of the Decalogue

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The Ten Commandments are the basis of Western civilisation, yet according to a recent article in *The Times* (Gledhill, 2004) few young people in Britain today even know what they are. A follow-up letter revealed that even an adult who claimed to know all Ten Commandments was quite confused about the numbering and thought that 'Catholics, Protestants and Jews have different versions of the commandments' (Lloyd, 2004). So what exactly are the Ten Commandments, how does the numbering work, and how do the various traditions and texts relate to each other? The present article sets out to answer these questions.

Ten Commandments

The term 'Ten Commandments' or – more accurately – 'Decalogue' comes from the Hebrew *asérét haddevarim*, literally 'the ten words' (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), though it was not commonly used before Clement of Alexandria in the second century AD (Houtman, 1996). There are two canonical versions of the text, in Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

Why ten? Does this number have any particular significance? Nielsen (1965: 6–10) surveys various possibilities, but is unable to come to a clear conclusion. It would seem there is no need to look for theological significance here. Perhaps it was simply a practical number for memorisation, one for each finger of the hands. Or the number itself may be incidental, simply resulting from the fact that the matters of crucial importance which were included in the list came to ten.¹

Although all traditions agree on the number ten, they differ slightly on

¹ Lang (2003) argues – unconvincingly – that in its present form the Decalogue is really a dodecalogue ('twelve words'), which was expanded from an earlier decalogue by the addition of the Sabbath commandment and by splitting the last commandment in two.

the division of the material. Three different numbering systems have been used, which result from different divisions at the beginning and end of the list:

Content (verse numbering from Exodus 20)	Philo ² , Josephus, Eastern Orthodox, Reformed, Anglican	Peshitta ³ , Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Roman Catholic, Lutheran	Orthodox Jewish
I am the LORD your God (2)	Prologue	Prologue	1
You shall have no other gods before me (3)	1	1a	2a
You shall not make for yourself an idol (4–6)	2	1b	2b
You shall not misuse the name of the LORD (7)	3	2	3
Remember the Sabbath day (8–11)	4	3	4
Honour your father and your mother (12)	5	4	5
You shall not kill (13)	6	5	6
You shall not commit adultery (14)	7	6	7
You shall not steal (15)	8	7	8
You shall not bear false witness (16)	9	8	9
You shall not covet your neighbour's house (17a)	10a	9	10a
You shall not covet your neighbour's wife (17b)	10b	10	10b

² Philo has the same enumeration as the others listed here, except that he places the prohibition of adultery before that of murder.

³ This is the predominant numbering in the Syrian tradition, but not the only one (Koster, 1980).

Each of these enumerations has its merits, but the first has greater antiquity and is preferable from the perspective of form and content. There are three main issues. First, at the beginning of the list, Exodus 20:2 is better taken as a historical prologue (as was common in the ancient treaties), rather than as one of the commandments. The Hebrew term 'ten words' could accommodate such a prologue as the first 'word', but it would be strange to have just one indicative followed by nine imperatives in a carefully structured list like this.⁴ Second, at the end of the list, it is artificial to divide the commandment concerning coveting into two, since the repetition of the same verb makes a very close link between the two prohibitions. Third, there is a clear distinction in meaning between the prohibition of worshipping other gods in verse 3 and that of making idols in verses 4–6, and these are better understood as two separate commandments. Although idolatry was a common feature of the worship of other gods, the two were not identical: it was certainly possible to make images of *YHWH*, and presumably also to worship other gods without actually making any images of them.

Two Tablets

The biblical traditions are clear that the Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets (Exod. 31:18; 34:1, 4, 29; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:10–11), inscribed on both sides (Exod. 32:15), which were kept in the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:16, 21; 40:20; Deut. 10:1–5; 1 Kgs 8:9; 2 Chr. 5:10). The use of stone rather than clay indicates the importance of this document and its intended permanence (Tigay, 1996: 48).⁵

The question arises whether the commandments were divided between the tablets (as has generally been assumed) or whether the two tablets were identical copies of all Ten Commandments (Kline, 1960).⁶ If the Ten Commandments were understood to be the text of the covenant (treaty) between God and Israel, then the latter could be the case, since it was conventional to make duplicate copies of the treaty document for the

⁴ Biddle (2003) says that the syntax of the commandments makes statements of fact rather than using imperative verbs, but this overlooks the fact that the Hebrew 'imperative' form is only used for positive commands, and negative commands are commonly expressed by the imperfect/jussive preceded by *lo*, as here.

⁵ For a discussion of the nature of the stone tablets, see Millard (1994).

⁶ See also Kline (1963: 13–26); cf. Collins (1992); Youngblood (1994).

suzerain and vassal respectively, and it is arguable that the sanctuary would be the appropriate place to deposit both the copy for God and that for the people. However, while it would make good sense to make duplicate copies and keep them in separate places for security, making duplicates and then keeping them in the same place (which is clearly what happened, if they were indeed duplicates) seems to be a rather pedantic imitation of the treaty-making procedure. Moreover, while it would be logical to keep God's copy in the ark, and thus in the most holy place, keeping the people's copy there as well would make it inaccessible to them and of little practical use. It would seem more probable that the pair of tablets kept in the ark were viewed as God's copy of the covenant, and that one or more accessible copies were made for reference by the people and their leaders (cf. Deut. 27:3; Josh. 8:32).

The OT itself does not give any indication whether the two tablets were thought of as identical copies, or whether the material was divided between the two. It is impossible to be certain, but the latter seems more likely.

Division

Is there a division or structure intrinsic to the Decalogue? If so, does this indicate how the material was divided between the two tablets? There are at least three suggestions.

First, the commandments may be divided into two groups of five: the first group can be seen as distinctively Israelite, whereas the second group reflects a social morality common to all mankind (e.g. Weinfeld, 1991). The first group concerns the love of God, and defines the relationship of each individual Israelite with YHWH. Each commandment includes the phrase, 'The LORD your God', and each one has various motive clauses and/or literary expansions (if the introduction can be taken to supply these for the first commandment, as it does according to the punctuation of NRSV). The second group concerns love for other human beings.⁷ These

⁷ Ewald (1876: 160–62) sees the first group as specifying the duty owed by the inferior and dependent to the superior, and the second group as treating the mutual duties between human beings. Phillips (1970), who also divides the commandments into two groups of five, believes that the second group is designed to protect the person (not property), but this depends on the doubtful assumption that the eighth commandment refers to kidnapping rather than stealing.

commandments are mostly brief in form though the last is somewhat extended. According to Jewish (and Calvinistic) tradition, each tablet contained five commandments, which would accord with this division of the Decalogue (cf. Philo, *Decalogue* 50; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3:101). It, however, does not account for the fact that the first five commandments are almost six times as long as the second five, unless it was thought to be only a brief form of the commandments that was engraved in stone.

Second, the commandments may be divided into two groups, one of four and the other of six, respectively dealing with relationship to God and to one's neighbour (cf. Nielsen, 1965: 33–34). This was suggested by Augustine and has been the traditional division in the Catholic and Lutheran churches (though in their enumeration the division is actually between the first three and last seven commandments). This division of material is slightly more balanced, but the first group is still three times longer than the second.

Third, Kratz (1994) divides the text on the basis of first and third person references to God, in Exodus 20:2–6 and 7–17 respectively. The first part consists of just two commandments, emphasising the exclusiveness of the LORD's claim on his people. The second part therefore consists of eight commandments, which can be subdivided into verses 7–11 and 12–17, two dealing with sacred and six with secular matters. Clearly this scheme is related to the second mentioned above, in that the honouring of parents is grouped with the commands concerning everyday life rather than with those concerning worship.

Of these three suggestions, the third is least convincing, since OT laws are not always consistent in the use of first or third person forms in referring to God (e.g. Exod. 22:20, 23, 28, 31; 34:24; Lev. 19:2–4, 5–8, 12, 14). We should be wary of reading too much into the change of form here, especially since it results in a division that does not work well in respect to content. However, it is not so easy to choose between the other two suggestions. At first sight it seems the first is preferable from the perspective of form (distinction between long and short commandments), while the second provides a clearer division on the basis of content (between matters relating to God and to other people, assuming that the honouring of parents belongs in the latter group).

The determining factor here is the interpretation of the fifth commandment. Philo (*Decalogue* 106–107) believes that it was placed on the borderline between the two groups because parents stand on the borderline between the mortal (in their kinship with other human beings)

and the immortal (since in the act of generation they are like God, cf. Amir, 1985: 156–58). It may be argued that in OT times the honouring of parents was not merely a matter of social relationships, but part of one's respect for God. Filial piety was not so much a matter of refraining from harming other people (as expressed in the last five commandments) as a fundamental virtue (expressed positively, like the fourth commandment on honouring the Sabbath) which followed naturally from honouring God, his Name and his Day. Of course, what this did mean was that to harm a parent was a particularly serious crime, and often led to capital punishment (e.g. Exod. 21:15, 17), but the emphasis in the Decalogue itself is on the positive aspect. The reward for keeping the fifth commandment is long life 'in the land that the LORD your God is giving you' (20:12), referring back to verse 2 and thus making an *inclusio* to round off the first half of the Decalogue. In Leviticus 19:2–4, the honouring of parents is closely integrated with the honouring of God and keeping of the Sabbath. Ephesians 6:2–3 distinguishes this as the 'first commandment with a promise', while the Jewish sages consider it the weightiest commandment (Weinfeld, 1991: 312).

Therefore the division of the commandments into two groups of five is preferable to either of the other suggested divisions, with respect to both form and content. The honouring of parents forms the conclusion to the first division rather than the introduction to the second. However, whether two distinct groups of commandments were deliberately written on separate tablets, or whether the material was spread over two tablets on the basis of how much text fitted on one tablet, is difficult to ascertain. The scarcity of writing materials in the ancient world, and the fact that the first few commandments are much longer than the later ones, may point towards the latter as being more likely.

Order

It appears that the order of the commandments within each group accords with the seriousness of the offence:

Loving God	Loving others
1. You shall have no other gods before me	6. You shall not kill
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol	7. You shall not commit adultery
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord	8. You shall not steal
4. Remember the Sabbath day	9. You shall not bear false witness
5. Honour your father and your mother	10. You shall not covet

To break a commandment in the first group generally leads to capital punishment (Exod. 21:15, 17; 22:20; 31:14–15; Lev. 20:9; 24:16; Deut. 17:2–7; 21:18–21)⁸ while in the second group only the sixth and seventh are capital offences (Exod. 21:12; Lev. 20:10; 24:21; Deut. 22:22). For the eighth and ninth, lesser punishments are decreed (Exod. 22:1–4; Deut. 19:16–21).⁹ The tenth is different in nature, for it concerns intention rather than action and people could hardly be taken to court for breaking it. The fact, however, that it is included here is significant since it shows that people could be morally guilty before God without having committed any visible offence at all (Wright 2004: 291).¹⁰

⁸ The punishment for making an image is not specified, but it was certainly considered a very serious offence (cf. Exod. 20:5–6; 32:1–35; Deut. 27:15) and probably resulted in capital punishment too.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the sanctions for breaking the commandments, see my article 'The Finger of God and the Forming of a Nation', forthcoming in *Tyndale Bulletin* 56 (2005): 21–24.

¹⁰ Smith (1991) suggests a chiasmic arrangement for the commandments in the form of an arch, with the prohibition against murder at the apex, those against idolatry and coveting as the two bases, and those in between forming matching pairs. It may be true that the commandments concerning idolatry and coveting are parallel in meaning (cf. Col. 3:5) and that there is an element of chiasm in this, but the rest seems rather artificial. To make the structure work, Smith has to count just nine commandments (by making the first into a declaration of exclusive sovereignty after the pattern of the suzerainty treaties) and this goes against the very strong tradition that there were ten.

On the order of laws in various ancient Near Eastern law-codes, see Kaufman (1987), who argues that 'within each topical unit the laws are arranged according to observable principles of priority'

Form and Style

Since the classic essay of Alt (1934), it has been conventional to distinguish two main kinds of law in the ancient Near East: *casuistic* (conditional, defining specific legal cases) and *apodictic* (unconditional, imperative). The former is widely used in ancient Near Eastern law-collections, whereas apodictic law is relatively rare outside the Bible. The essence of the latter is a categorical prohibition, which may take various forms, including:

- 'Whoever ... [offence] shall be ... [punishment]' (e.g. Exod. 21:12, 15, 17)¹¹;
- 'Cursed be anyone who ... [offence]' (e.g. Deut. 27:15–26);
- 'You shall not ... [offence]' (e.g. Exod. 23:1–3, 6–9; Lev. 18:7–18).

The Ten Commandments are formulated in consistently apodictic style. This is unusual compared to other biblical laws, which have a mixture of apodictic and casuistic styles (e.g. Exod. 22; Lev. 19). The closest parallel to such a consistent format is the series of curses in Deuteronomy 27:15–26.

The second person singular is used for the audience, which is unusual in OT law and unique in the Ancient Near East (cf. McConville, 2002: 20–25). Evidently the Decalogue is a personal address to the people, not a textbook for lawyers. The divine Law-giver speaks directly to those from whom he expects obedience. 'The law given by God has a fundamentally personal and interrelational character' and 'obedience to law is thus seen to be a response within a relationship, not a response to the law as law' (Fretheim, 2003: 192).

The commandments in the first group are significantly longer than those in the second. This may be because those in the former group are specifically Israelite and need justification and explanation, while the latter contains universally-recognised ethical principles.

Within the first group there is variation between the use of first and third person pronouns for God, but this appears to be simply a matter of

¹¹ This is superficially similar to casuistic law, but the grammatical structure in Hebrew is distinct and consists of a single imperative clause beginning with a participle, in a five-beat line of verse.

style and there is no need to draw theological conclusions.¹² The same variation is found in the Book of the Covenant, while the Holiness Code tends to use the first person and the Deuteronomic Laws the third person form.

Eight of the commandments are negative, while the fifth and sixth are positive, though there is also a negative element in the expansion of the fifth. Such juxtaposition is characteristic of all OT law and there is no tension or proof of priority between the two types (Childs, 1974). The predominantly negative format should not be viewed as a deficiency, as if the emphasis was on banning pleasurable activities. On the contrary, it allows a maximum of self-determination to the semi-nomads recently freed from slavery, whereas positive commands would be more restrictive (Mendenhall, 1954). The prohibitions mark the outer limits to be observed so that the divine-human relationship is not disturbed and the community protected from behaviour which could destroy it (Fretheim, 1991; Houtman, 1996).

Two Canonical Versions

What is the relationship between the versions of the Decalogue in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5? The former is presented as the direct words of God to Israel at Mount Sinai, while the latter is part of Moses' address to Israel on the plains of Moab, quoting the divine words. The content of the two versions is substantially the same, though there are some differences in wording, mainly in the fourth, fifth and tenth commandments:¹³

¹² Some of the rabbis suggested that the Israelites heard God speak only the first two commandments (which use the first person), but this is contrary to the claim of the text that all ten were received without human mediation (Goldman, 1956: 22–24).

¹³ The text is from NRSV. A more detailed comparison of the two versions is provided by Charles (1926: xxxiv–xliv) and Nielsen (1965: 35–44).

Exodus 20 8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labour and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.	Deuteronomy 5 12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labour and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.
12 Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.	16 Honour your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.
17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.	21 Neither shall you covet your neighbour's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbour's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Scholars have drawn various conclusions from these differences. Stamm and Andrew (1967) believe Exodus preserves an older version of the Decalogue, even though they consider the written form to be later than that in Deuteronomy because they connect the sabbath command with the priestly account of creation. On the other hand Hossfeld (1982; followed by Lang, 1984) argues that the version in Deuteronomy is original and that it was reworked and incorporated into the Sinai narrative of Exodus by a post-exilic redactor, a hypothesis which has been widely refuted¹⁴. According to Weinfeld (1991), both versions are expansions of an original shorter form, though that in Exodus is older. He admits there are some apparent Deuteronomistic phrases in the Exodus version, but argues this does not prove it was later, as they could be from the northern decalogue which he believes influenced Deuteronomistic literature.

Although certainty is impossible, it seems reasonable to assume that the Exodus version is earlier, since it is intrinsically more likely that extra material would have been added rather than original material omitted, and much of the extra material is characteristically Deuteronomistic (e.g. 'as the Lord your God commanded you', cf. Deut. 1:41; 5:32–33; 6:17; 9:12, 16; 12:21; etc.; 'that it may go well with you', cf. Deut. 5:29, 33; 6:3, 18; 12:25, 28; etc.).¹⁵

The Nash Papyrus and Samaritan Pentateuch

The Nash Papyrus was discovered in Egypt in 1902, and since then has been preserved in the Cambridge University Library. It contains the text of the Decalogue plus the Shema (Deut. 6:4–5), dating from the second century BC. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was the oldest extant manuscript of any part of the Hebrew Bible. However, although it is a very old manuscript, the form of the text appears to be a combination of that in Exodus and Deuteronomy, later than either of the canonical versions, and does not provide an independent testimony to the original text (Stamm and Andrew, 1967: 13). It is close to the Septuagint translation of Exodus, and may have been taken from the Hebrew text

¹⁴ E.g. Levin (1985); Graupner (1987); Kratz (1994); Graupner (2000).

¹⁵ See Greenberg (1985: 91–96) and Houtman (1996: 10–11). Also 'field' is a natural addition in view of the imminent prospect of the settlement. As a result of the additions, the divine name YHWH occurs precisely ten times in the Deuteronomistic version of the Decalogue, which may well be deliberate.

underlying that version (Greenberg, 1985: 94).¹⁶

Another version of the Decalogue is found in the Samaritan Pentateuch (see Bowman, 1977: 16–27; Greenberg, 1985: 91–94). It is certainly later than that preserved by the Masoretic Text and is characterised by harmonisation of some of the differences between Exodus and Deuteronomy. The division of commandments follows the Jewish tradition, except that Exodus 20:2 (//Deut. 5:6) is counted as a prologue rather than the first commandment. This leaves room for a distinctive Samaritan tenth commandment, to place stones inscribed with the Decalogue and build an altar on Mount Gerizim, which is drawn from Deuteronomy 11:29–30 and 27:1–8.¹⁷

Both of these alternative versions of the Decalogue are ancient and of great interest, nevertheless there is no doubt that they are later than those in the canon and give no reason to amend the traditional texts with which we are familiar.¹⁸

The Uniqueness of the Decalogue

There are several other texts in the OT which show similarities to the Decalogue, and parallels can be found to almost all the individual commandments.¹⁹ The most important texts are:

Exodus 34:11–26

This so-called ‘ritual decalogue’ focuses on observances related to worship and overlaps to some extent with the Decalogue (re: worship of one God,

¹⁶ Charles (1926: vii–xliv), writing not long after the discovery, transcribes and translates the text, and compares the three versions in detail, arguing that the Nash Papyrus agrees with the Septuagint in preference to all other authorities, and that it is closer to Deuteronomy but also makes use of Exodus.

¹⁷ Several abbreviated forms of the Samaritan Decalogue have been found on inscriptions (Bowman, 1977: 9–16).

¹⁸ For a detailed study of the textual history of the Decalogue, see Himbaza (2004).

¹⁹ Cf. Charles (1926: lix–lxiv); Wenham (1979: 264); Weinfeld (1985: 4–9, 18–26); Weiss (1985); Harrelson (1997: 21–33); Rodd (2001: 82–85).

idolatry, sabbath)²⁰.

Leviticus 19

This appears to be a reworking and expansion of the Decalogue, related to specific cases, with eight of the Ten Commandments quoted or alluded to in verses 4[1–2], 12[3], 3b & 30[4], 3a [5], 16[6], 11 & 13[8], 15–16[9].

Deuteronomy 27:15–26

Twelve curses, which overlap in content with the Decalogue but differ in form and character.

Ezekiel 18:5–9 (cf. 10–13, 14–17, 18) and 22:6–12

Two lists of basic moral and religious obligations, some of which are reminiscent of the Decalogue (re: idolatry, adultery and theft in the former; honouring parents, sabbath observance, murder and adultery in the latter) but also moral virtues (e.g. care for the needy, generosity, justice) more characteristic of wisdom literature and prophecy than the Pentateuch, and various ritual and sexual matters.

Hosea 4:2 and Jeremiah 7:9

Two brief lists of crimes, almost all in the Decalogue.

Psalms 15 and 24:3–6 (cf. Isa. 33:14–16)

Mowinckel (1927: 141–56; 1962: 177–180) describes these as 'entry liturgies' for the covenant renewal festival, which paved the way for the formation of the Decalogue, but Weinfeld (1985: 25) rejects the comparison because they mention only 'refined moral demands', and omit gross sins such as murder, theft and adultery.

These similarities are not at all surprising. It seems the Decalogue was well-known in Israel and had an influence on the writing of legal materials, prophecy and liturgy. However, none of the cited texts is as comprehensive

²⁰ Goethe (1773, see Nielsen 1965: 13–15) and Wellhausen (1889: 85–96, 327–33) believed the 'ritual decalogue' to be older than the 'ethical decalogue' of Exod. 20 and Deut. 5, but these terms are misleading generalisations and the dating is based on an evolutionary idea of Israel's history which has long been discredited (Gressmann 1913: 473–79; Alt 1934: 117 n. 95; Durham 1987; Harrelson 1997: 28). Also the division of commandments into ten in Exod. 34 is uncertain and it could equally be a dodecalogue.

in scope as the Decalogue, and all of them are almost certainly later in date.

There are also similarities with one or two ancient Near Eastern texts. The 'negative confession' in chapter 125 of the Egyptian Book of the Dead has clauses which are similar in content to the third, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth commandments, but the form is quite different from the Decalogue. There is also an ancient Babylonian ritual formula which parallels the sixth, seventh and eighth commandments (Burney, 1908: 350–52). However, there is no need to suppose literary dependence on these ancient Near Eastern texts, for the prohibition of murder, adultery, theft and the like is common in many cultures, and the parallels simply show that the Decalogue originated in a world which recognised a distinction between right and wrong in such basic areas of human life.

In conclusion, the Decalogue is unique in form, content and scope. There is no other text quite like it in the Bible or elsewhere. Its uniqueness, however, is not limited to matters of shape and structure but also extends to its origin and purpose, as I demonstrate in an article published elsewhere: 'The Finger of God and the Forming of a Nation'.²¹

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²¹ *Tyndale Bulletin* 56 (2005):21–24. I have also reflected on the significance of the Decalogue for today in 'Written in Stone? The Ten Commandments Then and Now', *Whitefield Briefing* 9.3 (August 2004)

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