

The Sinai Covenant and the Ten Commandments

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An Overview of the Wilderness Period

Because this material covers so many books and is so complex, it will help you to have a general overview of the major events in the wilderness accounts. The Israelites first travel to a holy mountain, *Sinai* or *Horeb*. Often people mistakenly assume that Moses received only the Ten Commandments at Sinai, but in fact he received most of the laws that are in the Pentateuch.

This revelation takes a long time to occur; Moses is on Mount Sinai for forty days. The people, already characterized as ungrateful and complaining, presume he has died, so they make Aaron their leader and fashion golden calves as representatives of their god.

God becomes angry and sends Moses down with a judgment against the people. Moses breaks the tablets engraved with the laws God has given him. He receives further laws, which include the laws for building the Tabernacle, for example. After two years the Israelites set out from Sinai. At first they try to enter the Promised Land directly from the south, but they grow fearful when they hear reports of the strength of the people who live there. God becomes angry at their lack of faith and pronounces a judgment against the generation that came out of Egypt.

The Israelites continue their journey, first to Kadesh Barnea, then through Edom and Moab. According to Deuteronomy a journey that normally takes eleven days takes the Israelites forty years! Along the way they meet many challenges: kings who oppose them, rebellion within their own ranks, and the temptation to settle with the communities they were supposed to march past. At last the Israelites reach their destination, and they cross the Jordan River from the plains of Moab.

The Wilderness as a Threshold

The Pentateuch portrays the wilderness period as a formative time in Israelite history. The number *40* is not to be read literally, but represents “a long time” and indicates that the wilderness was a significant part of Israel’s history. Some of the prophets will refer to this as Israel’s “honeymoon” period. The wilderness that separated Egypt and Israel served as the place where the contours of the later nation were formed.

Anthropologists would refer to this material as Israel’s *liminal* period. The word *limen* means threshold in Latin. Something is “liminal” if it is between stages. For instance, a teenager is sometimes said to be at a liminal stage—the threshold of adulthood, when she or he is not really a child, but not yet an adult. In many premodern societies, complex rituals marked the boundaries of a person’s life—rituals that were believed to help the person cross the divide. For instance, in Native American cultures, the vision quest is a ritual that marks a boy’s transition to manhood.

Israel’s wilderness wanderings mark its transition from a landless people called by God to a settled society living in the Promised Land in accord with God’s laws. This quest takes time and is fraught with danger and ambiguity. The narrative of the forty years makes clear that the biblical writers knew that the formation of a complex society could not happen overnight.



The core moment of the wilderness experience is the revelation of God's law to the community. Although some biblical texts suggest that this revelation took place at various stages throughout the years in the desert, the final form of the Pentateuch maintains that the core of the law was revealed at one particular time to Moses. The location for this revelation was a mountain in the wilderness, a mountain that the Elohist and Deuteronomist call Horeb, but that the Yahwist and Priestly writer call by the more familiar name, Sinai.

You may recall that Horeb / Sinai was the place where Moses had encountered the burning bush. This mountain was experienced by the Israelites as especially holy to God, as sacred space. We will see more than one divine appearance at this mountain in the Old Testament.

Law Codes in the Pentateuch

When we turn our focus to the laws in the Pentateuch, we find a complex collection of legal traditions. Source critics have demonstrated that what we now have in the Pentateuch is not a single law code but several distinct law codes from various periods of Israel's history. How did these critics reach this conclusion? First, many topics are taken up several times in the Pentateuch, not always in the same way. Want to know what animals to sacrifice on Passover and where to perform the sacrifice? That answer will depend on which law about Passover you are using.

The various blocks of law reflect different social settings as well. One block seems to preserve the laws of an agricultural society, while another is more concerned with an urban society. Following are the three most important law codes.

The Covenant Code

The Covenant Code in Exodus, chapters 21—23, contains laws stemming from a rural economy.

The Deuteronomic Code

The law code in Deuteronomy, chapters 12—26, reflects an urban-based monarchy. There is a law for the king here, as well as laws on how to conduct war and decide who is a true prophet.

The Holiness Code

The Holiness Code in Leviticus, chapters 17—26, was probably originally a law code for the priests. Here, however, it is presented as a law code for everybody. God reveals these laws to Israel. They are not in any obvious order, nor are they complete, but they reflect a religious vision of a perfect society.

The Ten Commandments

The most familiar set of Israelite laws is probably the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, are ten short legal principles, inscribed by God onto two stone tablets and then given to Moses on Mount Sinai. They appear to summarize the many laws that follow, and these actually make up only a small percentage of the laws in the Pentateuch.

The Ten Commandments are different from the other laws in a couple ways. First, they are physically set apart from the other laws, forming a complete unit by themselves. They appear in two



places: Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21. In addition, they are arranged in a particular order. The first three or four (depending on which list you use) concern crimes against God, the last six or seven concern crimes against humans.

Second, the Ten Commandments are stated differently than most of the other laws. The majority of the other laws are expressed in a conditional sentence: If you do this, then that will happen to you. The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, are in the form of a negative command (“You shall not . . .”).

This leads us to the most important difference between the two types of laws. Most of the other laws have a clear setting. These “if—then” statements arose from the setting of the court. (This does not mean that they were actually used in court cases, just that their language reflects that setting.) The description of the crime in the first part (“Whoever strikes father or mother . . .”) is followed by the punishment (“. . . shall be put to death” [Exodus 21:15]). The Ten Commandments have no clear setting. In fact, they are not really *laws* in the strict sense of the term.

For example, one of the commandments states, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). This sounds like a very clear law, but think about its ambiguity. Does it say what you should do to someone who does kill? Does it mean that all forms of killing should have the same punishment? Should someone who carries out a premeditated murder be punished in the same manner as someone who kills accidentally? Did the Israelites punish their soldiers who killed an enemy in battle? The law codes make it clear that the Israelites understood these differences. There were laws for murder, but also specific ones for accidental death and what we would call manslaughter.

So how is the Ten Commandments used? We’re not sure. They seem to have been principles more than laws. They stem from a very old and important tradition in ancient Israel. The fact that they were reproduced in both Exodus and Deuteronomy is evidence of their significance.

The Decalogue

We are used to thinking of the Ten Commandments as a kind of universal law, so it is easy to forget that they were addressed to a people who lived in a culture different from ours. Therefore, I would like to treat each commandment individually so that I can explain what each one meant for the Israelites. The contemporary meaning for Jews and Christians is more appropriately explored in a course on moral theology.

There shall be no other gods before me.

The ancient Israelites were not monotheistic; they believed that other gods existed. This commandment notes that they owed strict allegiance to the god that had chosen them. They were not to worship the sun god of Egypt nor the fertility god of Canaan. Yahweh alone was the god they should worship.

You shall not make an idol.

An idol was a symbol of a god’s presence within a temple. The people in the ancient Near East believed that a temple was the home of the god. To symbolize the god’s real presence in that temple they would place an object, such as a statue, that “pictured” that god within the innermost room of the temple. Worship of the god consisted in treating this symbol as if it were the actual god. Daily sacrifices were the god’s food, and priests were the god’s servants.



The Israelites did not use a statue in the form of a person or an animal to represent God's presence in the temple. Instead they had the Ark of the Covenant and the cherubim that were God's throne. For the Israelites, God dwelled invisibly above the ark and the cherubim. This commandment shows that this was considered a fundamental element of Israelite worship of God.

You shall not misuse the name of God.

In the ancient Near East, people swore solemn oaths by invoking the name of the gods. They swore in court proceedings. They made treaties and business deals by calling on the gods. They took vows by calling the gods to witness their solemn statements. They believed that the divine realm would "back them up," that is, carry out any punishment associated with violating solemn statements. Here Yahweh reminds them to invoke this divine partner carefully. They must not swear in the name of God if they have no intention of carrying out what they vow. They must not ask God to witness a treaty that they intend to break.

Remember to keep the Sabbath.

This commandment may show the most differences in its observance between ancient Israelites and contemporary Christians. This law demarcates sacred time: one day a week is "holy" to God. For Jews this day is the Sabbath, the last day of the week. In Genesis 2:2–3 God rests on this day, sanctifying it (that is, making it holy). It signifies that God's creation of the cosmos is complete and that there is nothing left for God to "touch up." According to Exodus, humans rest on this day in imitation of God. Deuteronomy 5:15, however, provides a different motivation for keeping the Sabbath. In Deuteronomy the Sabbath is a labor law, legislating a day of rest for every worker, including slaves. In Deuteronomy, God is primarily known for delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Thus the Israelites honor God by recalling this deliverance each week.

Christians believe they are heirs to God's work as Creator and Deliverer. But they also believe that God is most fully seen in Jesus. Jesus' Resurrection, which is celebrated on Easter Sunday, marks a new era for Christians, in sum, a new creation. Christians recognize God in their lives by observing this new day, Sunday, the Lord's day, in place of the Sabbath. To symbolize that Christ's Resurrection does in fact signal a new creation, the Lord's day coincides with the first day of Creation, Sunday, rather than with the last day, Saturday.

Honor your father and your mother.

I remember being threatened with this commandment during my childhood! How easily it was translated into the more benign, "Obey your parents!" Originally this law had little to do with childhood misbehavior. This commandment expressed the Israelites' respect for the elders in their community, stating how they should be treated by the adults of the next generation. Israelites lived and worked together as multigenerational families. In this setting the eldest generation had the final authority and was given the most honor. They made the decisions about personal and economic matters, including marriages; they determined how much to give to the temple, what gods the family would worship, and so on. Even if their mental faculties were not sharp, they were to be honored for their wisdom and experience.



This honor was a serious matter because it formed the very fabric of Israelite society. Offspring, that is, adult offspring, could be “divorced” from the family by being disinherited and, in some cases, stoned to death. The term *parent* referred to any elder who exercised authority in the family. Sometimes this was not a biological parent, as many women died in childbirth. Yet this commandment requires the same intergenerational honor, no matter what the family structure. The commandment suggests that its observation is crucial to Israel’s social stability, when it says, “that you may have a long life in the land which the LORD, Your God, is giving you” (Exodus 20:12).

You shall not murder.

The original Hebrew word can be translated as either “kill” or “murder.” This commandment provides a basic principle that all human societies adhere to. Unjust killing of another member of one’s society is destructive to that society. We know that this commandment does not forbid justified killing. For instance, it does not forbid killing on a battlefield or killing someone who attacks you. It does not even forbid the use of capital punishment. Whether the Israelites believed this commandment included all acts of unjust violence against another person is unclear.

You shall not commit adultery.

For the ancient Israelites, this commandment restricted female behavior more than male behavior. Adultery was defined as sexual intercourse with a woman who was married or betrothed to another man. It is a violation of a man’s right to exclusive ownership of a woman’s reproductive capacity. When such intercourse occurred, assuming both partners were willing participants, both the man and the woman violated the husband’s rights. If a man who was married or betrothed, however, had intercourse with an unmarried, unbetrothed woman or a prostitute, he was not guilty of adultery, as a wife could not expect that she was her husband’s only sexual partner.

You shall not steal.

This is a very straightforward commandment. The Israelites believed in private ownership of goods. Taking someone’s private possession, either by stealth or trickery, was an offense against God. This commandment applied even to kings; when King Ahab takes a field owned by a neighbor, God condemns him.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

The wording of this commandment reflects a courtroom setting. This commandment forbids lying in court against a fellow citizen. This must have been a serious problem in ancient Israel. We saw in the Third Commandment that a person was forbidden from swearing falsely in God’s name. Here again we see that perjury was a grave matter. It reminds us that modern criteria for guilt, which require corroborating physical evidence and eyewitness testimony, were not the rule in the ancient world. All that was needed to convict someone was testimony from one or more citizens, depending on the crime; we see examples of unjust imprisonment based on such testimony within the Old Testament.

This commandment is the first that uses the term *neighbor*. This was a technical term that demonstrates that the Israelites did not believe in identical treatment of all people. In the Gospels, which



were written much later, someone asks Jesus for a definition of the term *neighbor*, and he answers the question with the story of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:29–37), in which he extends the term far beyond its original meaning. In Israel a *neighbor* often meant a land-owning male or a social equal. In some texts it may not include women, slaves, resident aliens, or foreigners. This commandment probably envisions a broader definition, but it is striking that the text focuses on perjury against those in your community only.

You shall not covet your neighbor's goods or his wife.

These two commandments, which the Book of Exodus combines into one prohibition, seem to want to limit emotions, things that today we believe we cannot limit. Scholars debate this very point. We don't really know what was meant by the word translated as "covet." It does mean "want" or "lust after," but the degree to which it included planning or concrete action, such as stalking, is ambiguous.

In summary, the Ten Commandments were addressed to and preserved within a particular ancient near-eastern culture. Their unique wording reflects that setting, but the principles of justice and respect remain universally valid.

(This article is adapted from several excerpts from *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament*, by Corrine L. Carvalho, PhD (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006), pages 89–94.)

