Ten Commandments or Ten Commitments?

There is nothing particularly profound or original about the actual content of the Decalogue, and some of its "commandments" strike many people today as somewhat petty or irrelevant. Some of the commandments simply reiterate rather basic social obligations already acknowledged worldwide. For example, people who have never heard of the Bible nevertheless condemn killing, the dishonoring of parents, adultery, theft, bearing false witness, and coveting. They apparently did not need Yahweh to reveal this to them. Other commandments seem to establish doctrines and practices peculiar to Judaism (e.g., monotheism, anti-idolatry, respect for the divine name, and Sabbath observance). It would seem that if God were going to bequeath ten statements to the human race, he might do better than this.

But it would be a mistake to look for the profundity of the Decalogue in its *content*. If it is profound, it must be so with respect to its *context and application*. The embracing of these so-called "commandments" by a heterogeneous mix of people suggests that—in addition to a shared sense of gratitude for past good fortune—these were the only commitments they held in common, or felt they needed to hold in common. Political authorities, most of whom were now extremely weakened if not dead, would certainly have given subjects a longer and more explicit list of do's and don'ts. Voluntary compliance with the basic statements of the Decalogue may well have been regarded as an alternative to—or even a safeguard against—other more coercive forms of social or political control.

It is therefore ironic that Jews and Christians have often used the Decalogue—and the God who published it—coercively as such an instrument of social control, warning people to be good or else face dire consequences. This misuse of the Decalogue has been facilitated by the mistaken view that its statements are indeed "commandments" uttered by a demanding deity—a view that has unfortunately become deeply embedded in the consciousness of both Jews and Christians, and consequently of much of the world. In Deuteronomy, this text is referred to as the "ten words" (Hebrew *'asar debarim;* Greek *deka logoi*), understood generally as "statements," not specifically as "commands." This is reinforced by the fact that, grammatically speaking, the verbs used in the Decalogue are not commands (imperatives or prohibitives). Instead, they are simple future tense verbs or infinitive forms. No one is *commanding* anyone here in the Decalogue.[7] The Decalogue simply lists the basic principles that a lord—in this case, Yahweh—offers for the vassal's endorsement. In other words, a person who values and embraces these is poised to enter a covenant relationship with the one who proclaims them, namely Yahweh.

The Decalogue thus provides not a *proscription* against bad conduct but a *description* of a religious value system, in this case, the ethical obliga-

7. Some people who already feel a covenant bond with the biblical God may "hear" these ten statements as universal commands, even though they are not commands at all. Such a person might more correctly choose to "hear" them posed as personal questions: "Will you reject other gods, honor your father and mother, not commit adultery, etc.?" Within Judaism there is a tradition of viewing these statements in such a way, as if they were marriage vows between God and his people.

tions and personal commitments that provide the foundation of any and all human communities. These obligations are stated, not demanded. As in any covenant, the commitments must be voluntarily embraced and undertaken freely and gladly in grateful response for benefits and blessings already received. Technically speaking, at this point in the covenant-making process no relationship yet exists from which an overlord can boldly issue *commands*; here, in the stipulations, the overlord can only state the *principles* of central concern for the potential vassal to consider. Vassals must embrace the stipulations for their intrinsic merit alone, not because they are afraid of what will happen to them if they do not. In other words, people must see for themselves that these principles are compelling and good.

These are therefore not Ten *Commandments*. It would be much more accurate, and perhaps much better, to think of them as Ten *Commitments*, since Yahweh's rule becomes an effective and tangible reality only when human beings freely embrace them also *as their own personal commitments*. In other words, when people act on these *commitments*—all of which restrict self-interest—the rule of God becomes a tangible reality, establishing a religious basis (i.e., faith) on which human differences can be transcended and community achieved.

At the same time, these ten statements are flexible enough to accommodate wide-ranging cultural differences, not only in what they do say but also in what they leave unaddressed. For example, the Decalogue insists that the honoring of parents is a universal and unquestioned value, but it says nothing about how this should concretely manifest itself. Putting one's parents in a nursing home may be the honorable thing to do in one set of circumstances but not in another. "Adultery" is an unquestioned wrong always and everywhere, but legitimate marriage practices are never defined in the Bible: polygamy is not here outlawed, nor is Western-style monogamy mandated. The Decalogue says nothing about whether teenagers can drink alcohol, permitting coreligionists in, say, France, the United States, and Saudi Arabia to frame and decide the issue as seems appropriate to their different cultures. There is nothing here about how women should dress (veiled from head-to-toe as in traditional Yemeni society, or bare-breasted as in the Maldives), again permitting coreligionists to defer to prevailing cultural norms.

Of course, the Hebrew slaves could not have foreseen such a myriad of possible scenarios. Accepting this covenant simply meant that none of them were required to surrender his or her cultural heritage or distinctiveness, so long as it did not clash with these Yahwist principles. The "glue" that bound their community was not a common culture, ethnicity, or governing political structure, but a religious commitment to these obligations. While the biblical tradition will be quick to criticize any Yahwist with a halfhearted commitment to these obligations, it also originally allowed

tremendous latitude for cultural differences, historical contexts, and personal autonomy in areas unrelated to these ten covenant principles. Most people inclined to view Yahweh as a dictator fail to appreciate this. The goal was not to issue commands restricting, regulating, and standardizing behavior per se, but to enumerate those basic but universal *commitments* (or ethical obligations) that were both fundamental to human integrity in *everyone's* culture and essential to human community *everywhere*.[8]

These statements do not serve the ends of social control as such commandments would in almost all other societies. Instead, these ten commitments cross-culturally define human integrity, making possible a community based on that integrity. Such religious teachings (e.g., "God says not to steal") usually seem unnecessary or, at best, supplemental in a society whose cohesion is actually based on something other than integrity, such as nationalism, blood kinship, ethnic homogeneity, solidarity of interests, or simply externally imposed force (i.e., law and order). But the Decalogue insists that these (religiously grounded) commitments are always the *primary and essential* control mechanisms making any community possible. Unless people possess integrity in these fundamental aspects of life, no community can long endure, regardless of how strong its nationalism, ethnicity, tribal bonds, or social institutions may be. In other words, the Decalogue describes Yahweh's will simply as those ten basic commitments necessary to maintain human community with a minimum of conflict and coercion.

What made these obligations profound—and *religious* as opposed to merely *social*—is that at Sinai they stood not as supplemental commandments *alongside* other mechanisms of social control but rather *in place of* such mechanisms altogether. The existence of community is staked precariously on nothing more than people's commitment to these obligations and to the faith that inspires that commitment. There is no other fail-safe mechanism that can salvage community if that faith and commitment should wane (a sociologically sobering insight). That is what made the Sinai community religiously based, as opposed to culturally or politically based. The only homogeneity that existed among these people was their shared commitment to a very fundamental definition of human integrity and religious obligation—in other words, their basic value system.

The Decalogue thus constituted a religious *value system* that was genuinely "transcendent" in the sense that it actually *rose above* or *superseded* existing social and cultural differences. People with a frontier mentality might eagerly embrace something akin to this as a desirable basis for building a new community and future on the ruins of the discredited past.

In discussing "value systems," it is important to remember that a "value" is not simply an agreeable idea but something that actually determines one's commitments, choices, and activities. The Latin word for this

8. Centuries later, parochializing forces in Israel would append to the Decalogue all sorts of law codes mandating specific cultural norms, creating the impression that Yahweh was overweening in his demands, as concerned with what Israelites ate and how they dressed as with whether or not they told the truth, stole, cheated, or harmed others. To salvage an emphasis on the latter (ethical matters), the early Jewish Christians felt compelled to jettison all emphasis on the former (ethnic matters). See chapters 7 and 8.

was *valuta*, which corresponds to Anglo-Saxon *worth-ship*, the antecedent of our word "worship." In this sense, any time a person acts either on the basis of a commitment or to uphold a value, *by definition* that person is engaging in "worship." As we saw with Baal and Asherah (chapter 1), so it was with Yahweh: embracing a value system and worshiping are essentially one and the same thing—the "god" being worshiped, of course, varies, depending on what is specifically being valued.[9]

What Are the Yahwist Religious Commitments?

When viewed in the light of what we know about ancient patterns of thought, the connotations and significance of each covenant stipulation, when correctly translated, become dramatically different from the usual popular interpretations:

"You will have no other gods before me." In his treaty with Duppi-Teshub, Mursilis says, "Do not turn your eyes to any one else." Jesus echoes this in the NT: "No one can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24). To reject Yahweh is to enter into a conflicting covenant with someone or something else, to reject all Yahwist commitments and obligations altogether. "Turning to other gods" means embracing alternative values and commitments, thus threatening the community by rejecting the ethical bond that holds it together. To place other gods ahead of Yahweh is to legitimize value systems rivaling that of the Decalogue, substituting another value system that may, for example, be less tolerant of cultural differences or encourage one group's domination of another. It has nothing to do with participating in the rituals of the wrong denomination. Most reasonable people today are far more concerned about their neighbors' operating value systems than about which rituals they practice or where they practice them. The coreligionist across the street who neglects or mistreats his or her children is a far more serious *spiritual* matter than the agnostic next door who has always been a good parent and reliable neighbor.

"You will not make for yourself an idol . . . you will not bow down to them or serve them." This stipulation makes perfect sense when viewed in the context of the end of the LB Age, when all political power structures were discredited and in ruins. Monumental art and statuary typically had been commissioned to cast an aura of sacredness around official political organizations and to thereby sanctify particular socioeconomic agendas. "Graven images" of gods were symbols of power structures and interest groups. To "bow down" to them would be to ascribe value ("worthship") to that which they represent—the old ways of political domination and social control by coercion.

At the same time, it was forbidden to make an image of Yahweh that, given the context, surely meant transforming Yahweh into just

9. People are therefore always "worshiping," whether they realize it or not. The important question is, What are the specific core values that inform and characterize one's pattern of living—in other words, What is one's god? Paul understood this when he wrote that "in fact there are many gods" (1 Cor. 8:5) and that the god worshiped by those who live as enemies of the cross (i.e., those incapable of self-sacrificial love) is "the belly," that is, their own self-centered desires and appetites (Phil. 3:19). Unfortunately, this *dynamic* sense of worship usually succumbs to a more *formal* sense (worship as stylized ritual behavior performed in sacred places on certain cultic occasions), making worship seem more "special." Formal worship becomes a means for monitoring one's own piety, as well as that of others, transforming religion into just another instrument of social control.