

The Role and Status of the Ten Commandments in Judaism and Christianity

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The biblical book of Exodus presents the stories of how Moses was sent by his God to deliver his people from the bondage of Egyptians, and of how he received the law on Mount Sinai. The “Ten Commandments” or “Ten Words” were the core of the law that Moses received from his God and transmitted to the Jewish people. They were greatly honoured in the practice of early Judaism; their recitation being part of the daily temple service (Deuteronomy 5:6–21). Evidence of this is to be found in the Nash papyrus fragment that was discovered between 1948 and 1956. The fragment offers some more external evidence of the liturgical practice of the Ten Commandments that preceded the citation of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4).¹ Moreover, because of their importance in the life of the Hebrews, they were portrayed as being carved on two tablets of stone and recorded twice, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. They were highly valued in the practice of early Judaism.

Christianity accepted the Ten Commandments as the substance of Christian ethics at an early era. Early confirmation of their importance is apparent from the numerous citations of the Ten Commandments throughout the New Testament (Matthew 5; 19; Mark 10; Luke 18:20; Romans 13:9; James 2:11). Paul insistently stated that the tenth commandment convinced him he was a sinner (Rom 7:7–8). However, in Christianity, their role and status are understood and explained differently than they were in Judaism. In fact, Christianity claims that the ethical fulfilment of the Decalogue, and indeed of the whole law, is to be found in the teachings of Jesus Christ (Math 5: 17). Josephus stated that the Baptizer’s call to repentance, meant, precisely, returning to God’s commandments as revealed in the Torah.² Obviously, this is how, for example, the Apostle Paul understood and explained it. In 2 Corinthians 3 he speaks of the laws written on stone tablets as “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7). Of course, that is not to be understood as an attempt to abolish the Decalogue, but rather as a move from the killing letter to a quickening spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6).

In the following discussion, we present the role and status of the Ten Commandments as variously understood and explained in Judaism and Christianity.

First Commandment

For some Jews the first commandment begins with “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me”³ (Exodus 20: 3). From its first understanding as a statement of the nature of Israel’s God (in contrast to the gods of others) it came to be an affirmative declaration of the dominion of the Almighty over the universe and His authority as the

¹ BIBS 224/324, ‘Coursebook: The Ten Commandments’ (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2015), 6.

² Paula Fredriksen, ‘Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the Ten Commandments, and Pagan Justification by Faith’ (JBL 2014), 803.

³ In this essay, we are following the arrangement of the Decalogue that is based on Philo, Josephus and Min. of Rabbis. See Jason S. DeRouchie, ‘Counting the Ten: An investigation into the Numbering of the Decalogue,’ in *For our good always: studies on the message and influence of Deuteronomy in honor of Daniel I. Block*, ed. Jason S. DeRouchie et al (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2013), 96.

Lawgiver.⁴ This first explicit commandment is the beginning of God's revelation to the entire people of Israel. It is to be understood as a call to monotheism (worship of one God). Judaism has the devotion to a single deity (Unitarianism), which means there is only one Lord God in the world to be worshiped (Exodus 20: 2-3). This God is believed to be omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all-knowing) (Deuteronomy 32:39). In addition to this, God is believed to be self-existent (not created) but the creator who continues to care and be active in the created order (Isaiah 66:2). The pre-eminence of this first commandment made Judaism reject the notion of Trinitarianism (doctrine of the Holy Trinity). Christians, however, came to understand the first commandment in the light of Trinitarianism, accepting Jesus Christ as the Son of God (1 John 5:20; cf. Matthew 14:33). Of course, this claim was rejected by many Jews, because of their belief in the uniqueness of God. From a Christian point of view then, the doctrine of Trinitarianism amplified the first commandment for all that Christians believe that their God is the same God that is worshipped in Judaism (Matthew 22:35-38), but in three Persons.⁵

Second Commandment

In Judaism, the role and status of the second commandment "Never make a carved image" (Exodus 20:4) are connected with the first commandment (Leviticus 26: 1). Jewish people were forbidden from allowing any created thing, including a human being, to become equal to their Lord God. In Hebrew tradition, the prohibition against any graven image, or any likeness of anything, is interpreted literally. For example, in the book of Deuteronomy 4: 16-20, we see a list of things that people are prohibited from making as images. Now, in Christianity, there are two main differing teachings concerning this commandment. Protestant Christian denominations value the status of the second commandment literally as it is done in Judaism. They forbade any kind of images to be used in their daily service, except for some who allow the use of the cross. On the other hand, in traditional Christian denominations, such as Catholic and Orthodox, the concept of this commandment is understood metaphorically. That means these churches allow the use of images, statues and crucifixes. However, according to their apologetic argument, these images or statues are used only as a teaching tool to help people to recall the person or thing depicted.⁶

Third Commandment

⁴ Leo Michel Abrami, 'the ten commandments as positive affirmations' (Jewish Bible Quarterly Vol. 38, No.1, 2010), 33.

⁵ We have to note here that the doctrine of Trinity was not mentioned directly in any book of New Testament. In fact, it was found in the second century of Christianity. For more about this subject, see Millard J. Erickson, 'the Person of Christ, Christian Theology', (Baker Academic: 1998), 346.

⁶ Unfortunately, the conflict between traditional and non-traditional churches concerning this matter does not seem to have an end in sight. There are many books and articles published from both sides concerning this subject.

This third commandment “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:7) played a significant role in the life of Jewish community, particularly in the life of priests. False swearing was among the greatest insults that man could offer to God because the name of God expresses his character and power (Leviticus 19: 12). That does not mean the priests were forbidden from charging people by an oath. For example, there are two biblical stories demonstrating the importance of the charge by an oath in the case of perjury. The first story is recorded in the book of Numbers 5:19 and the second one is from Matthew 26: 63. In Judaism however, swearing truthfully by God’s name was not forbidden (Deuteronomy 6: 13; 20:10; cf. 2 Samuel 19:7). In Christianity, the third commandment is valued in light of Jesus’ teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, He teaches that false swearing alone was actually forbidden by the Law, then He continued to honour the name of God and condemn blasphemous swearing on His divine authority: “But I say to you, Do not swear at all” (Matthew 5:34). His commandment to his listeners was “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37).

Fourth Commandment

The observation of the Sabbath, or the Lord’s Day, has a significant role in the social life and religious institutions of Judaism (Exodus 20: 8).⁷ Initially, in the Ten Commandments the writer explains the origin of the Sabbath as being a holy day, is firmly rooted in the story of Genesis 2:2 where God made the heaven and earth and all that within and then He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the people of Israel were asked to observe this commandment even before the other eight commandments.⁸ In the book of Exodus, we discover the first mention of observing the seventh day is in chapter 12 verses 16. Jews were asked to keep the Sabbath as a holy day set apart for God.⁹ The importance of observing the Sabbath in Judaism was connected with various other religious ideas. For example, the Sabbath was observed because God had, with an outstretched arm, freed his people from the bondage of Egyptians (Deuteronomy 5: 15). Also, besides not working on the Sabbath at all, the whole Jewish family would have a meal, and songs are sung to praise their Lord God (Genesis 13: 6; 20:11). The Sabbath also was observed, for the sake of the physical rest of humanity and animals (20: 10). Of course, the transgression of this commandment was a death penalty (Genesis 31:15). Now, in Christianity, the interpretation of this commandment is shifted from ceremonial, or as Fredriksen described it ‘Jewish ancestral

⁷ It is important to note here that in the book of Exodus 20:8 the author used the word ‘Remember’, whereas in Deuteronomy 5:12 he used ‘Observe’.

⁸ Except for the first commandment, observing the Sabbath might be considered as the first commandment that YAHWEH commanded his people to obey after He intervened clearly. Before Moses received the Ten Words from his God, there is no indication of the other Eight Words being formed as Commandments.

⁹ According to Genesis 16:27, some people disagreed with Moses about this commanded and worked on the seventh day. See David J.A. Clines, ‘the Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible,’ (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 37.

practices',¹⁰ to moral aspects of the law.¹¹ According to the New Testament writers, the act of observing the Sabbath is no longer in force as it was in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ made this change. For example, in Mark 2:27 Jesus said "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath". That means the law of God, overall, was for the benefit of the human race, and to enhance humans in their lives. Paul in Colossians 2:16-17, explicitly refers to the Sabbath as a shadow of the new covenant, which is no longer required since the substance (Christ) has come. It is quite clear in those verses that the observance of the Sabbath, as practiced in Judaism, is no longer required for the new covenant people. Thus, from the Judaic perspective, the role and status of this commandment are absolutely diminished in Christianity.

Fifth Commandment

'Honour your father and your mother' (Exodus 20:12). This fifth commandment stands at the point where the values of Judaism and Christianity meet. As far as Israel was concerned, this commandment had a promise of a long life that could be referred to the nation as a whole.¹² That means instead of a long life for each individual Israelite, the nation itself would live a long life if they keep honouring their fathers and mothers. On the other hand, cursing one's parents, or perhaps rejecting their authority, was a capital offense. God's commandment on this subject was clear: "All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them." (Leviticus 20:9; cf. Proverbs 20:20). In the New Testament, however, there are many verses that reflect on this issue. For example, Luke said of Jesus that He was subject to his parents 2:51. Matthew also showed Jesus' considerable concern about parents, when He rebuked the Pharisees for breaking the commandment of God for the sake of their tradition (Matthew 15:4). The epistles, likewise, contain verses that reflect on the high primacy of the role and status of this commandment (Ephesians 6:1-4; 1 John 2:1-29).

Sixth Commandment

"You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). This commandment played a major role in the social life of Israel, for it was concerned with the safety of human life within the community of Israel, against destruction by their fellow Israelites (Deuteronomy 21: 12). The commandment was usually limited to murder in the criminal sense and was not used for accidental killing (Deuteronomy 4:42). That does not mean Israelites were called to pacifism. There are many biblical stories that justify killing, and even some of them are unacceptable. For example, the Israelites were urged to kill the innocent people of Jericho (Deuteronomy 20: 10-16; cf.

¹⁰ Fredriksen, 'Paul's Letter to the Romans', 805.

¹¹ It is argued that the ceremonial aspect of the Sabbath lies in its specification of the seventh day, while its moral aspect is held to involve the setting apart of one day in seven for worship God. Read more about this subject D. A. Carson, 'From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation', (WIPF and stock publishers 1982), 392.

¹² Addressing the Ten Words, the people of Israel continue to be addressed as "you." Read James L. Kugel, 'How to Read the Bible, A Guide to Scriptures Then and Now', (Free Press 2007), 252.

Joshua 6: 21; 11:11); they were urged to kill their family for the sake of keeping the commandments of God (Deuteronomy 13:6); and of course, they would have no mercy for their enemies (Joshua 6: 21).¹³ On the other hand, in Christianity, all of that is utterly diminished by Jesus Christ. Also, the role of this commandment can be understood as a call to pacifism.¹⁴ For example, when we look at the New Testament, we see that Jesus Christ indisputably commanded his followers to “turn the other cheek” when they are treated with unjust violence (Matthew 5:39). The simple interpretation of this commandment can give a primary meaning of pacifism. Therefore, many pacifists will argue that since Jesus Christ did not use a sword, so we should not either. Jesus did not strike down evildoers with his dagger. Therefore, if Jesus is the embodiment of justice and God of love, then we should follow his footsteps. If He did not use physical force to restrain evil, neither should we. Moreover, in Matthew 5: 21 the root of murder, ‘anger’, stands on the same level of guilt with murder. That means Jesus and his followers reinterpret the role and status of this commandment in a way that totally contradicts with how it is been interpreted in Judaism.

Seventh Commandment

“You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20: 14). This moral commandment, explicitly, prohibits a man from committing adultery with any other human being or animal (Leviticus 20: 10-21). It could be understood as being derived from the principle of "Respect for the integrity of the family institution."¹⁵ But sometimes Judaism represents the concept of adultery as a denial of God (Ezekiel 16:32; cf. Hosea 3:1). Moreover, the author in Exodus 34:15 talks about a covenant that is prohibited with the inhabitants of the land, particularly, those who serve other gods than Yahweh. The reason for that prohibition is that foreign women, who prostitute themselves to their gods, will entangle the sons of Israel idolatry. Of course, the punishment that was the death penalty was applied to all parties, the man, woman and animal. However, it is worth observing that there is no recorded instance, in the whole of Hebrew Biblical narratives, of anyone actually being put to death for adultery.¹⁶ In Christianity, however, the status of this commandment is lifted up to a higher degree, which made the practice of its role harder. In Matthew 5: 27, Christ assured his listeners that the commandment of adultery did not regard only the external act, but, in fact, the secrets of the heart, and the movements of the eyes. He declared that those who look on a woman to desire her, have already, in the sight of God, transgressed the commandment, and committed adultery in the heart. Regarding the punishment of the transgression of this commandment in Christianity, there is no death penalty. Christianity values the role of this commandment through the eyes of mercy, at least this is what Jesus taught (John 8:7).

¹³ Behind each of these stories there are ancient histories that may be better understood and justified with further examination.

¹⁴ Lisa Sowle Cahill, ‘Love Your Enemies, discipleship, pacifism, and just war theory’, (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1994), 2.

¹⁵ Leo Michel Abrami, ‘the ten commandments as positive affirmations’, 33.

¹⁶ S.L. Mckeating, ‘Sanctions against Adultery in Ancient Israelite Society’, with Some Reflections on Methodology in the Study of Old Testament Ethics, (JSOT 11 (1979), 58.

Eighth Commandment

“You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:14). In Judaism, the role of the last six commandments was to teach the people of Israel how to respect their neighbours (Leviticus 19: 11). Furthermore, their concepts were to provide a social basis for ethics and moral principles for subsequent generations. It is worth to mention that this prohibition follows commandments on murder and adultery, which deal with human relationships. The act of stealing was understood as the secret taking of another’s property without the owner’s knowledge or permission. When stealing would have taken place, it was often accompanied by other deceits, including deception, trickery, and oppression (Psalms 50:18; 62:10; Jeremiah 7:9; Ezekiel 18:7,12,16,18; Hosea 4:2; Micah 2:1–2). However, regarding the sentence of transgression, the death penalty was for kidnapping (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7); punishment for the theft of livestock and treasured goods was usually to return double the value (Exodus 22:4). In Christianity, we find in the New Testament books that stealing is still regarded as a serious transgression. The Apostle Paul states that no thief will have a portion of the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). However, on the positive side, Paul also states that those who had been thieves should steal no longer but do honest work to help those in need (Ephesus 4:28). Peter also placed stealing in the context of sins such as murder and evil-doing (1 Peter 4:15). It should be mentioned that, in Christianity, the concept of neighbour~~hood~~ is to be understood broadly rather than narrowly (Luke 10: 30-37).

Ninth Commandment

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour” (Exodus 20:16). This commandment played a significant role in the religious and social councils of Israel. Evidently, the legal activities are evident in various sections of throughout the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25:5–10; Ruth 4; 2 Samuel 15:2; Amos 5:12). Perhaps, the most famous example of false accusation (witness) leading to gaining someone’s property has to be Jezebel’s attainment of Naboth’s vineyard for Ahab by having false witnesses accuse Naboth of blasphemy (1 Kings 21:1–16). Thus, the incident of Naboth’s vineyard demonstrates the status and serious nature of false testimony as well as its possibly tragic results. In Christianity, however, the commandment played the same major role as in Judaism. Four New Testament stories demonstrate the status and the consequences of this commandment. First, the false testimony that took place in the trial of Jesus. According to the New Testament account, the council of the Sanhedrin actively looked for false testimonies to accuse Jesus and put Him to death (Matthew 26:59–61; Mark 14:55–59). Second, Peter’s repeated denial of Jesus under oath (Matthew 26:69–75) also this story provides a most memorable example of false testimony. Thirdly, Ananias and Sapphira, who lied about the price they received for their property when they claimed that all of it goes to the church (Acts 5). And finally, the trial of Stephen, where false witnesses accused him of blasphemy (Acts 6:13).

Tenth Commandment

“You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, etc.” (Exodus 20: 17). In Judaism, the command not to covet your neighbour’s belongings is evident in the Old Testament narratives. For example, when Ahab desired Naboth's field, the consequence of transgressing the commandment was apparent in the tragic death of Naboth. (1 Kings 21:13–24). David also desired to have Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11: 1-4), the consequence of his desire was the death of his child that Bathsheba bore (2 Samuel 12: 18). However, coveting was not limited only to the powerful people. Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, coveted the possessions of Naaman to the extent that he lied to get access to the possessions. Because of that he was struck with leprosy (2 Kings 5:19–27). All these stories demonstrate how important the role of this commandment in Judaism was. The Christian perspective on this commandment is more profound than that it is in Judaism. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reinterpreted the status of this commandment on the basis of pure intention. For example, in Matthew 5:28 Jesus stated that whoever looks at a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

In conclusion, these Ten Commandments played a significant role in both Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism, the literal interpretation of the role and status of these Commandments were the foundational doctrine to Israelites, whereas in Christianity, grace, mercy, and love formed a new conception of their role and status.

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