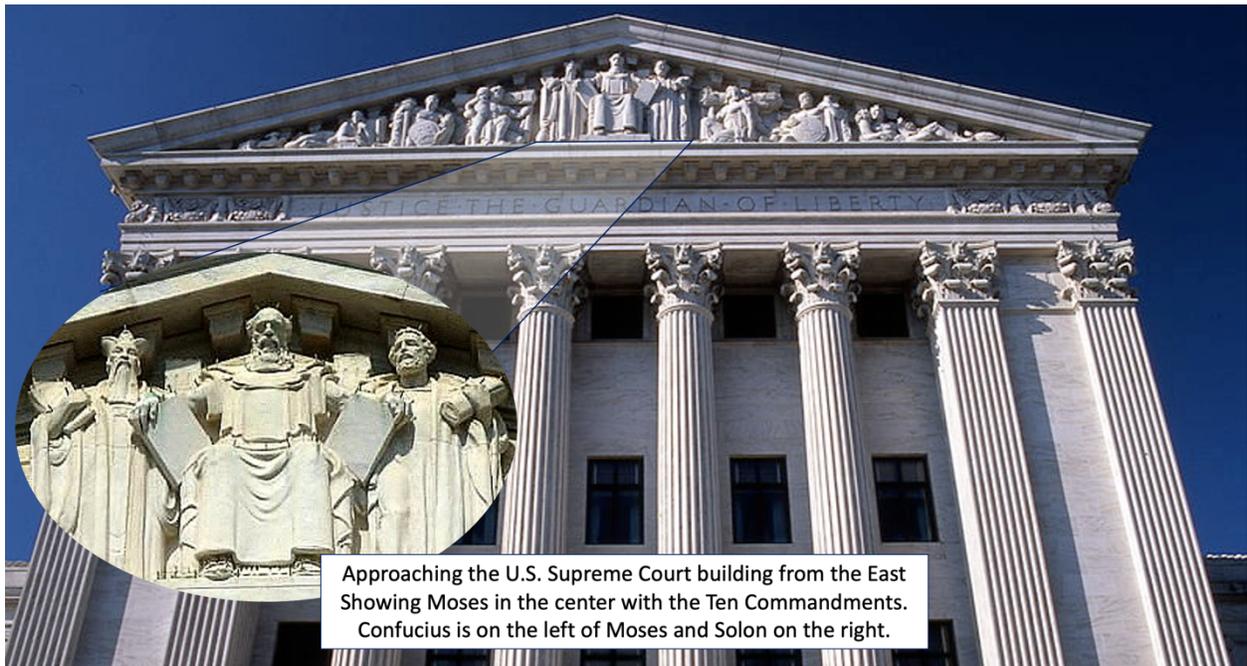


Chapter 4 The Ten Commandments

When people think of the Old Testament Law, one of the first things that often come to mind are the Ten Commandments. Many have seen the Cecil B. DeMille film, where Charlton Heston descends Sinai with two stone tablets in hand. In Western civilization, the Ten Commandments have served as a bedrock for most legal codes. One can find the Ten Commandments emblazoned on many court houses, even the United States Supreme Court references it inside and out.



Approaching the U.S. Supreme Court building from the East
Showing Moses in the center with the Ten Commandments.
Confucius is on the left of Moses and Solon on the right.



The South wall frieze from inside the U.S. Supreme Court courtroom exhibit great law givers from history holding a tablet of the Ten Commandments. To the left of Moses is Hammurabi.

Some people today believe these commandments are binding today. Others ascribe to some, but not all of the commandments. But most everyone believes at least some of the injunctions from Sinai are critical to a functioning society.

The Ten Commandments are found in two places in the Bible. First, when recounting the experiences at Mount Sinai, Moses presents the commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. Then in his final speeches to Israel, Moses reminds them of the commandments one by one in Deuteronomy 5:4-21.

Various religious groups have numbered the Ten Commandments variously, but for my purposes, the numbering doesn't matter as much. I will use the following numbering system:

1. I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself a carved image...
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain...
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother...
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness...
10. You shall not covet...

One can readily see that these naturally divide into two groups. The first four commandments center on one's behavior toward God. The latter six concern the behavior of one person to another.

On a basic level, the commandments each have an apparent meaning, that is worthy of study and application. But each commandment does something more. Each commandment reflects aspects of God's nature that provide greater clarity in the basic understanding of the instruction, but also give deeper glimpses into the God who gave the instructions.

Law as a Reflection

Law has always been a reflection of its author(s). Several examples suffice.

Example 1 – Abortion. One of America's biggest flashpoints on the legal front concerns abortion. Historically, states made their own laws and decisions about abortion. One state might allow abortion, while another state made abortion illegal. Still yet another state might allow abortion under certain circumstances, but not others.

Then in 1973, the United States Supreme Court struck down a number of abortion laws as wrongly infringing on a woman's right to make choices about her own body. The case arose from Texas, where an abortion was illegal under any circumstances unless the life of the mother was in danger.

In this example, one can readily see the laws as expressions of the morals, ethics and values of the laws' proponents. The laws of Texas reflected the legislative views that abortion was the taking of an innocent life, and so should not be allowed unless another life (the mother's) was endangered. This wasn't an arbitrary law. It was a law rooted in the character and morality of those who wrote it. Similarly, the Supreme Court's ruling, which one could call "judicial law," was rooted in the beliefs of those judges who signed onto the opinion. It showed that those justices placed a greater value perceived in a constitutional premise of liberty and freedom than that of the unborn, at least until the unborn reached an age of viability.

Example 2 – The Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence in the face of an awkward Biblical instruction. In Romans 13:1-2, Paul wrote,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

Whether Jefferson himself believed in what Paul wrote or not, certainly many of the founding fathers, and the populace that rebelled against King George and England were fervent in a Biblical faith. So in the face of such a passage, Jefferson and others had to explain why they believed that they had a legal right to resist the authority that Paul told them not to resist!

As noted earlier, Jefferson was steeped in the writings of John Locke. The thought of Locke had also been marked by the writings of Samuel Rutherford, of *Lex Rex* fame. But while Rutherford had written that the king should be under the Law, Locke took that thought further.

Locke advocated that the true "sovereign" was not a king. The sovereign was society itself. So while society might allow a king to rule, there was a social contract that required the king to rule appropriately. If the king violated the social contract, it justified the society to establish a new social contract as its sovereign.

Hence, in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson cited 27 notable violations of the social contract by the King of England. These were not minor offences. These were violative of deeply ingrained beliefs that were “unalienable rights” of all people. For Jefferson, these were entitlements of “Nature and of Nature’s God.”

Ultimately, however, in reading these, one can read reflections of the core values and ethics of Jefferson and others like him. Some are obvious values found in Jefferson’s indictment that the king “has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.” But some are more subtle in reflecting values that one might not so readily see such as the king “depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury.” Jefferson valued these things else they wouldn’t have made his list.

Example 3 – The Code of Hammurabi. I have written earlier of the Code of Hammurabi. That code serves as a good example of how the law reflects the character and ethic of Hammurabi as the law giver.

Hammurabi ruled Babylon from 1792 to 1750BC. The 42-years was a *long* reign in that time. Upon his father’s death, Hammurabi ascended the throne as a young man not yet twenty. Initially Hammurabi consolidated the populace’s support by continuing the civil projects his father had underway. While Hammurabi captured a few neighboring areas, his real military efforts began with his conquering more extended areas while in his forties.

Correspondence still available today, shows that Hammurabi was personally involved with many governing decisions day-by-day. He seems to have delegated very little as he oversaw even the smallest details of governance.

Not surprisingly, then, as Hammurabi set out his legal code, he did so with a concern not only for establishing his authority, as I discussed earlier. But he also gave great minutiae in detail for how society should function. The detailed king who took personal interest in the smallest state matters, put onto his stone statute with his laws such minutiae as:

- “If [a man] has hired a rowing boat, he shall pay for its hire 2 ½ grains of silver per day.”
- “If a man has hired an ox-driver, he shall pay him 6 *kur* of grain per year.”¹

¹ Translation from Kitchen, Ken, *Treaty Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East* (2012), Vol. 1, at 171-173.

Still further one gets insight into the self-importance of Hammurabi by reading the curses he attached to the end of his law code:

If that man has not heeded my words which I have inscribed on my stela... (if) he has altered my words, (if) he has changed my plans, (and if) he has removed my inscribed name, and has inscribed his own... may great Anum, the father of the gods who designated my reign, remove from him the awe of kingship, may he break his scepter, may he curse his fate.²

Hammurabi wanted his fame!

The Ten Commandment's Reflection of God

The challenge for a student of the Torah, something Paul urged Timothy to be, is to discern the reflection of God found in the Torah. Unlike the obvious instruction of commands like, "Do not steal," deep meditation is called upon to read the Law and better understand the nature of God. Meditation and thought on the Law and God's nature produces the blessings of passages like Psalm 1,

Blessed is the man... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

Because each commandment has an immediate and somewhat obvious instruction, my goal is to contemplate each instruction and its ethical injunction. In that vein, I want to understand not only the black and white of the command, but also the spirit behind the command. But I don't want to stop there. I want to see the revelatory insights about God inherent in each Law. If someone studies the commandments simply as rules, one walks away with ethics. But when someone studies the commandments as a reflection of God, one walks away understanding the Creator and the story of salvation.

**Command 1 - I am the LORD your God...
You shall have no other gods before me.**

² *Ibid.*, at 181.

On an initial level, this command is fairly plain. Israelites were to be monotheists. There was one true God, and they were to worship none others. Yet as one thinks through this, several important truths about the character and reality of God become apparent.

Israel had come from Egypt, a land of countless gods. Pharaoh was a god in charge of the kingdom. It was Pharaoh's job to make sure that Egypt functioned well. This would include responsibility for seeing to the worship of the many gods. Pharaoh would maintain the priests, the projects, and the peace.

In addition to Pharaoh, Egyptians worshipped Osiris, the god of the underworld. Supposedly Osiris had originally been a king of Egypt, but after his death was resurrected and became god of the Underworld. He played a role, therefore, in the death of people as well as their resurrection. Not surprisingly, one can see the extension of his reign into the flooding of the Nile which gave resurrection to the crops of Egypt.

Osiris was married to Isis, who was responsible for resurrecting Osiris after he had died. Caring so much for Osiris, Isis was seen as a goddess of love and family devotion. Egyptians turned to her for problems of love and life. If the health of a child were a problem, an Egyptian might turn to Isis, hoping her maternal love would kick in and come to the child's aid. Egyptologists have discovered numerous spells seeking her help.



This image of Isis comes from the tomb of Nefertiti, the wife of Rameses II (the likely pharaoh of the Exodus). Isis is the figure on the right, leading Nefertiti, on the left, into the afterlife.

It shows that by the time of Moses and the Israelites, Isis had assumed many of the roles Egyptian theology had earlier assigned to the sky goddess Hathor. One such indication is Isis is wearing a sun disk on her head, showing her role as a consort of the sun god Ra. The sun disk is between two horns because of the association of Isis with a cow, the symbol of her maternal concerns.

Osiris and Isis had a son, the god Horus. Usually shown as a falcon (or a man with a falcon head), Horus was the god of hunting and war. For some periods of time, the Pharaoh was seen to be an incarnation or manifestation of Horus.

Seth was the Egyptian storm god. He oversaw chaos, and he ruled over the desert. He was seen as a god of violence as well.

Ptah was the god of craftsmen, architects and builders. Ptah was thought to be the creator god who brought the world into existence. With all the building that Egyptians did, Ptah was a significant deity with a large following.

Re was the Egyptian sun god. Egyptian religion taught that Re would sail his boat across the sky each day, from east to west. Then at night, Re would return to the east via the underworld to again sail and take the sun across the sky.

Thoth was the Egyptian god of writing and wisdom. Egyptians believed that he invented language and hieroglyphs. As the wise one, Thoth is shown in funerary artwork weighing the hearts of deceased to give a report to Osiris.

These are just a few of the more prominent gods, but depending upon the time, Egyptians could truly call upon several hundred gods and goddesses for one reason or another. This was a mindset that had infected the Israelites during the centuries they lived in Egypt. It was the teaching that Moses had, being raised in the house of Pharaoh. As the early martyr Stephen noted in his defense, recorded in the book of Acts,

Pharaoh's daughter adopted [Moses] and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:21-22).

A core part of the wisdom of the Egyptians was knowing which god to call upon for which matter. So Moses would have been schooled in the knowledge of these gods, their places of authority, their cares and concerns, and their abilities.

In light of this background, Moses was receiving a very important command from God in the first of the Ten Commandments. There was never to be a single god who would take precedence over the LORD. This commandment stemmed from and reflected the reality that God was all-powerful, present everywhere, with care and concern for all his people. God was the answer for every need Israel would ever have.

One reads confirmation of this in the needs written up in the narratives associated with the Biblical Law. For example, God instructed Moses to build a fairly elaborate tabernacle (tent) complete with all the accouterments of worship. God's design necessitated great skill with fabrics, animal skins, construction, metal work, work with stones, and more. Israel need craftsmen to build and make these things. But Ptah was not their answer. The LORD was architect and the LORD imbued the chosen people with the skill to build what God designed.

The LORD said to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab... And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: (Ex. 31:1-6).

The people would need water, but Osiris was not their answer. They were to turn to the LORD. The people would go to war, but it was the LORD, not Horus to whom they should turn. The people would have family issues, but the LORD would solve those, not Isis. The people didn't need Thoth for his wisdom and writing. God wrote the wisdom of the Ten Commandments with his own finger (Ex. 31:18).

The key to Israel understanding that no god should be sought over against the LORD is the key to understanding a major way that this command reflects a truth about God. God is not limited. God doesn't have a domain. God's territory is all encompassing. In modern theological language, God is "omnipresent."

God is not only everywhere, but he is also all powerful. The Israelites didn't need to worry about their problems being greater than what the LORD could handle. The LORD was the only God Israel would ever need. So, not only was his presence everywhere, his power was all-encompassing ("omnipotent" in theological language).

Both God's omnipresence and omnipotence are seen effectively in the prologue God gave to this first commandment. God begins the commandment with the reminder,

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery... (Ex. 20:2)

God had displayed his presence, even among the gods of Egypt, as well as his power over those gods.

Another aspect of God's character revealed in this first commandment is God's relational nature. God isn't one disinterested in his people. God isn't one who might take a time-out from being the god the people needed. God was committed to the venture to the very end. In fact, the venture was one purposed and designed by the relational God, seeking to restore the relationship with his people that had been lost through the effects of sin and disobedience.

These aspects of God are just as important in the days of the New Testament and they are no less important today. As Paul instructed Timothy to learn from the Law, one can readily see how these aspects of God would help Timothy in his life and ministry. It is no less true for me today.

While I am not tempted to seek out the wisdom of Thoth, nor the counsel of Isis in rearing my children. And while I have not sought the blessings of Ptah in building my home, I might more easily fall prey to other "gods." Money; popularity and friends; food, drink, and drugs; all of these and more can become gods we seek out in the place of the LORD. These have no real power, certainly not compared to the omnipotent God. If I reflect upon the first commandment and discern the character and nature of the LORD, I will know better.

Command 2 - You shall not make for yourself a carved image...

Again, on a base level this command is somewhat open and shut. Israel shouldn't have made a golden calf. The clay figurines that served as tokens of the pagan gods were no-noes. The Egyptian temples with the carved gods and goddesses were not models for how the LORD would be worshipped. While the command may seem simple enough, further meditation on this command informs one of something very important about God's nature, as well as the nature of people.

People inherently like things that make sense, things that fit into one's mind. Neuroscientists describe a phenomena of the human thinking called, "Cognitive Ease" or "Cognitive Fluency." One wanting a primer on this should read Nobel Prize winning psychiatrist Daniel Kahneman's work, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Chapter 5 describes the way human brains work in a comfort zone where careful thought is utilized less when one is more comfortable with the surroundings or

material being presented. In everyday language, people like to be at ease mentally as well as physically.

This human desire for ease is part of why humans have spent untold time in history trying to make God into something that readily fits into our minds. While Genesis 1 and 2 explain that God made humanity in his image, since the fall, humanity has reversed that story. Humanity tries to make god in our image. Israel, Egypt, the Canaanites, the various Mesopotamian cultures, ancient Greece, Rome, even religions of the far East, have made representations and models of gods in an effort to have something that is easy to see, easy to understand, and easy to find comfort.

One must not be thinking that this second command of God was one that blurred into the first command. God wasn't simply telling Israel that no other gods were to be idolized and worshipped. God had already dealt with the issue of being the sole God in commandment one. This second command stopped Israel from reducing the LORD God into something that put them at ease, something that was a visible reminder that they could see, handle, and even worship.

Here the golden calf episode looms large. While Moses had been on the mountain receiving this and other Laws, Israel got worried a bit and got tired of waiting. The Israelites wanted something comfortable, something tangible to worship as their God. So, Aaron took gold from the people and fashioned a golden calf, and the people proclaimed,

“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” (Ex. 32:4-5).

Israel wasn't forgetting the LORD. They were reducing him down to a golden calf as the “gods” who brought them out of Egypt.

While humanity might like to reduce God into something that is easy to understand, something that fits into one's image of what God should be, when one does that, one commits a grave error. God's Law on this reflects the truth that the eternal God is not one that fits into anyone's comfort zone. No one can reduce the eternal God into a form that encapsulates his true divine nature.

God is greater than one's thoughts. God's fulness is deeper than anyone can fathom. No one can know God fully. One can know God *truly* because God has revealed himself, but that should never be mistaken for knowing God *fully*.

Contemplating the divine nature of a God who can never be represented by a man-made image, should move one beyond "cognitive ease," into careful thought. This engages the mind in deliberate ways. One's image of God expands beyond the ability of the brain to comprehend. One is stopped from reducing God and instead is pushed into expanding the mind.

This movement to worship the Lord in this way eliminates one's efforts to control God. God doesn't have "his place" in anyone's life or in the world. God isn't in a box. Instead, one learns that God has no limits.

A further implication of this involves what theologians call the "aseity of God." From the Latin words "*a*" and "*se*," denoting "from one's self," the aseity of God speaks to God being without limits, in time or essence. God wasn't caused or created. God was always existent. The people might create an image of God, but even that lost the truth that God was never created. Most every Egyptian god had a time when she or he weren't. Not too differently from idols, Egyptian gods were created. Not so the LORD. He has always been and always will be.

The aseity of God has another level of meaning, however. Because God always was, God is entirely self-sufficient. God has no need of anything or anyone. Wrapped within the Trinity, God has love, relationship, expression, and eternity. God never made the cosmos or humanity because God needed anything. God isn't an ego in desperate need of human worship. Humanity has no right or ability to conjure up God, offering to him something that would entice God's cooperation in some human endeavor.

The import of this should not be lost. God needs nothing from humanity, yet God engages humanity. God relates to people *not to get something, but to give something*. God gives to people his instructions, his guidance, his care – all for people to have a chance to live their best life. This is a life that involves growing in and walking with God in relationship of Creator and created. This involved learning about the God who has no needs, yet who seeks to love and give.

Meditating on these things are life transformational, whether one lived at the time of the Exodus, at the time of the New Testament, or today.

TO BE CONTINUED>>>>