The So-Called "Ten Commandments" and the Relational, Vocational Decalogue

Mark A. Throntveit

Luther Seminary, mthrontv@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/286

Published Citation
The So-Called “Ten Commandments” and the Relational, Vocational Decalogue

MARK A. THRONTVEIT

A nyone who has ever read a newspaper or a bedtime story recognizes the necessity of reading different material in different ways. Recently, it has become fashionable in social commentary to designate the so-called Ten Commandments as the “Ten Suggestions,” both indicating the declining respect these venerable words have received in contemporary society and obviating the claim that they make upon our lives. Actually, my reading of our contemporary, politically correct culture leads me to suggest that a more accurate rendering might be the “Ten Requests,” along the lines of “Thank you for not killing.”

Be that as it may, how we read the Ten Commandments has a definite effect on how we hear them, as well as how we factor them into our lives. Not surprisingly, most people tend to hear these venerable words as “law.” As soon as one opens this legal Pandora’s box, however, one finds oneself in the midst of endless controversy over what understanding of law best accounts for their unusual character.

One line of inquiry, initiated by Albrecht Alt in 1934, discerned two different

1This essay is dedicated with gratitude and affection to Terence E. Fretheim, my esteemed professor, valued colleague, and parade example of excellence in scholarship, pedagogy, preaching, and acuity.

kinds of law in the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22–23:33): “casuistic” or case law, found in judicial proceedings throughout the cuneiform writings of the ancient Near East, and “apodictic” law, arising out of Israel’s worship of God. Casuistic law is formulated in conditional sentences in which the protasis (or “if...” clause) states the circumstances of the case and the apodosis (or “then...” clause) proposes the legal consequences. Apodictic law consists of direct, second-person commands or prohibitions with no mention of sanction for noncompliance. Alt believed this latter form was unique to Israel and aptly characterized the Ten Commandments as God’s direct address to Israel. While subsequent scholarly investigation has considerably modified these claims, Alt’s basic distinction between casuistic and apodictic law and his assignment of the Ten Commandments to the latter still enjoy wide scholarly acceptance.

Closely connected with this line of inquiry is the very common attempt to see the Ten Commandments as the “stipulations” of the treaty—or in biblical jargon, the “covenant” between God and Israel, based on the analogy of the Hittite suzerainty pacts of the fifteenth to fourteenth centuries B.C.E. Since these dates roughly correspond with those of the conservative dating of the exodus, this evidence has been used to bolster Mosaic authorship of the Ten Commandments, though not without significant challenge.

On a different tack, many Lutherans, and others who operate within the law/gospel dialectic, emphasize the imperatival nature of the commandments (Thou shalt/Thou shalt not) and have tended to see the Ten Commandments in terms of an imposing demand rendered even less attainable by the interpretation offered in the Sermon on the Mount that equates hatred with murder and hankering with adultery. Thus, the Ten Commandments are designed to convict us of our sin, drive us to despair, and demonstrate our need for a savior.

Others, especially in the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions, are persuaded that these commandments provide a window into the mind and heart of God, functioning as a clear expression of the divine will for humanity and, for the Christian, as exemplary guidelines for morality as well as sanctification.

The above readings all highlight various aspects of the truth contained in the Ten Commandments, aspects of truth that depend upon how you hear the word “law.” In these familiar words God does address us directly; we do need to realize the desperate nature of our situation; and who can argue with moral guidelines? But, what if the Ten Commandments are not “law”?

In this essay I suggest that Exod 20:1–17 is misconstrued as “law,” at least as

---


The So-Called “Ten Commandments” and the Relational, Vocational Decalogue

popularly understood by parishioners. A more nuanced reading, sensitive to such matters as the biblical insistence upon law as gift, the narrative setting of this material, and close grammatical investigation of the verbs employed, will demonstrate the advantages of Terence Fretheim’s relational, even vocational understanding of this central passage. Since these matters are intertwined with scholarship’s inability to solve the structural riddle of the Decalogue, I will begin with a brief survey of those attempts. My own structural proposal and some discussion of its ramifications will conclude the essay.

**SOLA STRUCTURA**

In the vast literature devoted to our passage one frequently encounters statements like, “There does not appear to be a logical order to the commandments, though the series begins with obligations Israel has towards God and then continues with the obligations that the Israelites have toward each other.” Such comments are prompted, in part, by the confusing presence of three systems of numbering the commandments, all with support from the accents of the Masoretic Text.

1) The most common enumeration, used by most Protestants and the Greek Orthodox tradition, goes back to Philo and sees Exod 20:2 (“I am Yahweh, your God...”) as a prologue to the commandments, v. 3 (prohibiting other gods) as the first commandment, and vv. 4–6 (prohibiting images) as the second. Both references to coveting in v. 17 constitute the tenth commandment.

2) Lutherans and Anglicans, following Augustine and the Roman Catholic tradition, agree that v. 2 is a prologue, but combine the commandments prohibiting other gods and images (vv. 3, 4–6) into their first commandment. To maintain the number ten, it then becomes necessary to divide v. 17 on coveting, into the ninth and tenth commandments.

3) Judaism has traditionally seen v. 2 (“I am Yahweh...”) as the first commandment. They agree with Augustine that vv. 3–6 form one commandment (though for them it is the second), and with Philo that v. 17 is a single commandment.

There are problems with all three. The Philo tradition has not dealt with the...
grammatical problem of the antecedent to "them" in v. 5 that led Augustine to see vv. 3–6 as a single commandment. On the other hand, the Augustinian separation of v. 17 into two distinct commands, while possible, in that the apodictic formula is repeated, seems somewhat arbitrary in light of the decisions regarding the extent and numbering of the first and second commandments in vv. 3–6. Finally, the Jewish claim that v. 2, "I am Yahweh...," is the first commandment, stretches the meaning of that term in both form and content.

On exegetical grounds, the Jewish enumeration preserves the best of Augustine and Philo, namely, a single commandment for both vv. 3–6, as in Augustine, and v. 17, as in Philo. Unfortunately, this results in only nine commandments. The anomaly of v. 2 as the first commandment vanishes, however, upon seeing that the Hebrew text refers to the so-called "Ten Commandments" as "the ten words" (from יִצְוֹת, "word, matter, thing"), that is, "the ten statements" (Deut 4:13; 10:4). Since they directly address the people, have the character of general principles, and prescribe no penalty, this more literal translation accurately differentiates this material from the associations English speakers hear in the word "commandment" and removes the formal anomaly of v. 2.

Despite this confusing array of numberings, there have been several attempts to find a "logical order" in the commandments. We will look at three representative approaches.

1. The presence of two positive commands—concerning the Sabbath, and parents—among eight prohibitions inscribed on two tablets has led many to posit an original structure containing ten short, negative, categorical phrases in the form "You shall not..." The change to two positive forms, the presence of motive clauses, and the shift from direct address by God (vv. 2–6) to indirect speech (vv. 7–17) are all seen as later expansions. Such speculative reconstructions have a place, but only after one has exhausted the possibilities suggested by the final form of the text.

2. Hartmut Gese claims that biblical "decalogues" are constructed from five pairs of commands. On the analogy of the literary device of parallelismus membri-num ("parallelism of members"), Gese suggests that each of five areas of life is dealt with in two parallel aspects. By transposing the commandments concerned with killing (v. 13) and adultery (v. 14), on the strong textual evidence of this ordering in the Septuagint, Luke 18:20, Rom 13:9, Philo, and the Hebrew Nash Papyrus, Gese reconstructs a comprehensive Decalogue whose five paired commandments move from God through the neighbor and testify to God’s concern for all areas of life.


12For example, Patrick, Old Testament Law, 39.

The So-Called “Ten Commandments” and the Relational, Vocational Decalogue

I. God (commandments 1 and 2: Exod 20:3, 4–6)
   “You shall have no other gods before me.”
   “You shall not make for yourself a graven image.”

II. Holiness (commandments 3 and 4: vv. 7, 8–11)
   “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”
   “Remember the Sabbath day.”

III. Family (commandments 5 and 7: vv. 12, 14)
   “Honor your father and your mother.”
   “You shall not commit adultery.”

IV. Humanity (commandments 6 and 8: vv. 13, 15)
   “You shall not kill.”
   “You shall not steal” (originally kidnap).

V. Neighbor (commandments 9 and 10: vv. 16, 17)
   “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”
   “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.”

This ingenious approach calls attention to the concern for all of life; as Gese says, “Here Torah is describing the condition of well-being which Israel attains through the revelation that makes new life before God possible.” In addition, the reconstruction deals basically with the text as we have it, only making textual changes that have considerable warrant in the tradition. Foster McCurley has further refined Gese’s insights:

I. The Person of the Lord
   “You shall have no other gods before me.”
   “You shall not make for yourself a graven image.”

II. What Belongs to the Lord
   “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”
   “Remember the Sabbath day.”

III. Family Relationships
   “Honor your father and your mother.”
   “You shall not commit adultery.”

IV. The Integrity of Persons
   “You shall not kill.”
   “You shall not steal” (originally kidnap).

V. What Belongs to Other Persons
   “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”
   “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.”

One might carry McCurley’s presentation one step further, since all the areas can be subsumed under the umbrella of “integrity,” Gese’s “condition of well-being.” A more cohesive analysis might display the “Integrity of the Family” (X) as a central core, framed by two panels that parallel the “Integrity of God’s/the Neighbor’s Person” (A, A’) and the “Integrity of God’s/the Neighbor’s Belongings” (B, B’):

A The Integrity of God’s Person
   “You shall have no other gods before me.”
   “You shall not make for yourself a graven image.”

---

14Here Gese assumes that “steal” refers to the “stealing of people” or kidnapping.
B  The Integrity of God’s Belongings
"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."
"Remember the Sabbath day."

X  The Integrity of the Family
"Honor your father and your mother."
"You shall not commit adultery."

A’  The Integrity of the Neighbor’s Person
"You shall not kill."
"You shall not steal" (possibly "kidnap").

B’  The Integrity of the Neighbor’s Belongings
"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."
"You shall not covet your neighbor’s house."

But, it must still be asked, is the final form of the text, with no rearrangement of commandments, capable of structural analysis?

3. Pride of place in this regard must go to those Jewish interpretations that divide the commandments into two tables of five.17 Those comprising the first pentad (through the honoring of parents) each contain the phrase “Yahweh your God,” are replete with expansions and motive clauses, and deal with obligations to God. The second pentad, with no motive clauses or references to God, deals exclusively with social obligations. Such a division meshes nicely with Jesus’ famous summary in Matt 22:34–40. The first pentad corresponds to love of God (see Deut 6:5) and the second to love of neighbor (see Lev 19:18).

Christian appropriation of this schema has simply differed on the number of commandments contained on each “table.” Augustine is determinative here, especially his interpretation of the first three commandments (on his reckoning, vv. 3–11, through the Sabbath material) as a reference to the Trinity. Later Protestants divide the tables similarly, with the major break occurring after the Sabbath commandment. Thus, while the number of commandments relegated to each of the two tables differs among all three systems, all three agree on two tables of the law, divided between obligations to God and obligations to the neighbor.

The common assumption, here, is that the mention of “two tablets of stone” (Deut 4:13) suggests a division of the commandments into two parts, with the obligations to God on one tablet and the obligations to the neighbor on the other. It is more likely, however, that, in line with ancient Near Eastern covenantal practice, all ten were inscribed on each tablet and that each party (God, and Israel) retained their own copy.18 Thus, there is no need to limit the structure of the Decalogue to two tables.

17 For Deut 5, see Moshe Weinfeld, Deuteronomy 1–11 (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 245.
A MODEST PROPOSAL

This essay has lifted up a number of observations about the Ten Commandments. Several of the difficulties readers experience arise from a lack of agreement as to whether these ten "statements" are adequately described with the word "law," or if so, which of the several meanings of "law" is meant. Recognition that they are statements and not commandments is, therefore, a useful distinction. Gese and McCurley suggest that a concern for the whole is at least possible. Finally, the various enumerations are predicated on the questionable assumption that there were two stone tablets with the ten "statements" divided between them. Recognition of the common practice of duplicate copies in covenantal situations in the ancient Near East opens the way for a tripartite division of the material.

It may come as a surprise to hear that there are no imperatives in the so-called Ten Commandments. Technically, as Martin Buber maintains, since there are no negative imperatives in Hebrew, the "Thou shalt nots" are ambiguous in form and may be interpreted as indicatives: "You will not." The two "positive" commandments, regarding the Sabbath and parents, begin with infinitives absolute, not imperatives. This is certainly the case for "remember" (רלכ), translated as "remembering." "Honor" (רשב), on the other hand, is ambiguous and may also be translated as a piel infinitive construct, or a 2ms piel imperative. On the basis of the unambiguous infinitive absolute "remembering," one should also render "honoring" in this way. Thus, we should hear all these statements as setting the parameters of behavior more comprehensively than simply listing prohibitions. We should hear them as descriptions of what life lived in relationship with God looks like.

These positive statements, in conjunction with "I am Yahweh..." (v. 2), all without finite verbs, provide the Decalogue's structural backbone, by dividing it into three sections and governing the seven subordinate negative statements. Finally, Bonhoeffer, in linking the programmatic statement of God's grace in v. 2 with what follows, suggests:

What it means for our life that God is the Lord and our God is told us in the ten short sentences. The connection becomes most obvious when we insert a "therefore" before each of the sentences. "I am the Lord your God; therefore you shall not...."

The following graphically presents the preceding analysis:

---

22 Bonhoeffer, "The First Table," 56.
A  Since I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, therefore:

- You will have no other gods before me. You will not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You will not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.
- You will not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

X  a Remembering the sabbath day, to keep it holy, therefore:
  b Six days you will labor and do all your work.
      But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God;
      c you will not do any work—you, your son or your daughter,
         your male or female slave,
         your livestock,
         or the alien resident in your towns.

   b' For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them,
      but rested the seventh day;

   a' therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

A’ Honoring your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, therefore:

- You will not murder.
- You will not commit adultery.
- You will not steal.
- You will not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- You will not covet your neighbor’s house; you will not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The first section (A) is introduced by the positive statement “I am the LORD your God...,” which governs the two following statements that outline our relationship with God. As can be seen by the highlighted mots crochets or link words (the LORD your God, and the land) this first section is linked with the third section (A’) that begins with the positive statement about honoring one’s parents, which governs the remaining five statements that outline our relationship with society. The central section (X) serves as a bridge between the vertical and horizontal relationships portrayed in A and A’, so that these two aspects of life meet in the central relationship of Sabbath, where we, in Fretheim’s words, “participate in God’s intention for the rhythm
of creation," without which the world would not reach its full potential.\textsuperscript{23} This central section displays its own concentric ordering as indicated in the diagram.

Fretheim has devoted a good part of his scholarly output to the explication of his perceptive insights into the pervasive character of creation throughout the Old Testament. The structural analysis presented above enhances his major creational, relational, and vocational themes.

With regard to creational concerns, the placement of the Sabbath material at the center of the structure highlights the familiar grounding of the Exodus Decalogue in creation.\textsuperscript{24} More significant is Fretheim’s insistence that the explicit nature of the connection between Sabbath and creation leads to a creational understanding of the Decalogue’s purpose: to keep order in the world lest it revert to primordial chaos. Thus, “the commands are not the heteronomous imposition of a set of rules; to obey them is to be what one was created to be.”\textsuperscript{25} The apparently different motivation in Deut 5, based upon the redemptive activity of God in the exodus, fades before the creational foundation of the Red Sea crossing. The appearance of the dry land at the separation of the chaotic waters of the Red Sea (Exod 14:21) strongly recalls God’s creative activity (Gen 1:9–10), as does the verb \textit{ilii?} (“to get, acquire, create, buy, possess”) in Exod 15:16b, “until the people you have created pass by.”\textsuperscript{26}

The relational aspects of the Decalogue appear in the initial address of an “I” (God) to a “Thou” (the second-person singular addressee). This interrelatedness is advanced when God recounts in highly personal ways divine activity on behalf of Israel. “Obedience to law is thus seen to be a response within a relationship, not a response to the law as law.”\textsuperscript{27}

But it is Fretheim’s proposal that the Decalogue is fundamentally concerned with Israel’s vocation that breathes new life into these old words. I close with an extended quotation:

The covenant at Sinai with its accompanying laws is concerned most fundamentally with Israel’s vocation in the world in the service of life. The Sinai covenant does not establish God’s relationship with Israel; the Israelites are “my people” early in the book of Exodus (e.g., 3:7–10). These people are the inheritors of the promises given to their ancestors (Exod 3:15–17; 6:4, 8), a covenant that God remembers (2:24; 6:4–5) as given to the ancestors and to their “descendants” (Gen 17:7). It is this ancestral covenant that grounds

\begin{itemize}
  \item Fretheim, \textit{Exodus}, 230. Notice the wording: “sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping.” The central importance of the Sabbath has also been stressed by Patrick D. Miller. See his \textit{Deuteronomy} (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) 79–84.
  \item Terence E. Fretheim, \textit{Exodus} (Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 222–223.
  \item Ibid., 159, 167. English versions reject the creational aspect of \textit{ilii?}, but see the marginal note in the New English Bible (“madest thy own: or didst create”) and Peter C. Craigie, \textit{The Book of Deuteronomy} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 157, esp. note 18.
  \item Fretheim, \textit{God and World}, 149.
\end{itemize}
Moses’ appeal to God when the people break the Sinaitic covenant (Exod 32:13), indicating that the Abrahamic covenant is more foundational for the God-Israel relationship. The Sinai covenant is a matter of Israel’s vocation, not its status. It is a formalization of Israel’s role in the world—to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:5–6). The giving of the law to an already redeemed people is in the service of this vocation, to which the people agree to be obedient (Exod 19:8; 24:3, 7).²⁸

MARK A. THRONTVEIT is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

²⁸Ibid., 146.