

The Ten Commandments: Harsh laws? Or a meeting of lovers?

“Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire...and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.” (Exodus 19:18-19)

Moses’ reception of the Decalogue (‘Ten Commandments’) on Mt Sinai, in the sight and hearing of the people gathered, is a dramatic biblical scene. The Book of Exodus describes this moment as theophany. There, in the presence of the whole community, God reveals the Torah, the divine teaching that welds the God-Israel relationship into an everlasting covenant. God, who is beyond all things, draws his people to the Divine Presence in a radically new way.

Reading Exodus 19, one can’t help but notice the amount of preparation involved in the lead-up to the Decalogue: the public gathering, sights and sounds, sense of awe, the solemnity of Moses’ approach... Even before the Lord actually ‘speaks’ the Ten Commandments, what is the text trying to tell us about this moment?

As the Jewish sages ponder this event they note that the text speaks of fire, smoke and thunder before and after the Decalogue, but there is no mention of them during the Decalogue itself. Says the creative storytelling of the Midrash: when God speaks, the earth falls silent:

“When God gave the Torah, no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, the Seraphim did not say ‘Holy Holy,’ the sea did not roar... The whole world was hushed into breathless silence and the Voice went forth.”¹

Amidst the celestial drama the sages detect an exquisite thread of loving intimacy as God draws close to God’s people in an unprecedented way. It’s not just ‘what’ is said in the Ten Commandments, it is ‘how’. Even silence can be interpreted.

According to Rashi,² when the text says that ‘Moses led the people out of the camp toward God’ (19:17), it suggests the meeting of lovers. As Israel goes out toward God, God goes forth to meet Israel like a bridegroom going out to greet

his beloved. Likewise, the Talmud connects the Sinai revelation with the day of the Sabbath since, in the Jewish understanding, this is the day of intimate union—for wives and husbands, and for human beings and their Creator.

So convinced were the sages of the radical depths of the relationship forged between God and Israel through the gift of Torah, that in the Midrash we find the angels appalled at the idea!

“When Moses ascended to heaven, the angels complained... ‘What is a mere mortal doing here in our midst?’ God replied, ‘He has come to receive the Torah.’ The angels replied... ‘It is fitting that you give Torah to us in heaven. Why? Because we are holy and pure and it is pure and holy... far better that it remain with us.’”³

Abraham Heschel⁴ observes that in Jewish sacred writings Torah’s heavenly essence is personified: Torah is God’s darling daughter whose splendour never wanes, even after she departs from the divine domain to be among mortals. While not to be equated with the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, Christians will note a certain resonance here with their own belief in the divine Son. Heschel himself remarks on this as “a striking example of similarity-with-difference between Judaism and Christianity.”⁵

There is much to ponder in this Torah text, interpreted by Jewish tradition, to enrich our view of the Ten Commandments and to probe our Christian understanding of Jesus as God’s living Word, God’s *living Torah*.

1. Exodus Rabbah 29:9 2. Rashi: 11th c. Torah scholar, France. 3. Midrash on Psalms 8:2 4. Heschel, 20th c. Jewish theologian. 5. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, 323.

Sources: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (London/New York: Soncino, 1983); Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 1999); Heschel, *Heavenly Torah*, (New York, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York, 1994); Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two, Holy Week* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 169; Scripture: JPS.

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