

Ten Commandments

This week we explore afresh a passage which is lodged in most Christian memories as the ‘Ten Commandments’ (Exodus 20:1-17). Actually, the Hebrew word for ‘commandment’ (*mitzvah*) is not used here. A more accurate translation would be ‘Ten Words.’ Translated into Greek, this becomes *deka logoi* which in English becomes ‘Decalogue.’

Read the Decalogue in Exodus 20:1-17.

Read also the scenes which introduce and conclude the Decalogue: 19:18-25 and 20:18-21. Note the drama that surrounds these ‘Ten Words’... a smoking, trembling Mount Sinai afire with the Lord’s presence... thunder and lightning... a blaring horn... awestruck people held at a safe distance as the prophet Moses goes forward to meet God...

We are left in no doubt that the utterances are those of the all-powerful God of Israel! This is theophany. God’s self-revelation take place.

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

Much discussion has taken place among Jewish commentators as to whether verse 2 constitutes a commandment in itself or is simply an introductory phrase. It is certainly a power-packed statement. Before any directive about what we ought do, it tells us what God has done for his people. Says Benno Jacob:¹ “By *anokhi* [‘I am’] he referred to the person of God. He was not an impersonal idea one speaks about or believes in but the living God directing his ‘I’ to the ‘Thou’.”

Ponder the meaning of verse 2 and its relationship to all the commandments that follow. What thoughts and insights emerge?

Verse 2 makes clear that the Decalogue is situated in the memory of the Exodus event. As Christian scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, “The God who commands is the God who delivers.”² This list of rules cannot be reduced to a simple transfer of power from one monarch

(Pharaoh) to another (God). Rather, it signifies a complete overturn of the previous social order in Egypt for a radically new order based on the Lord God’s care for his people. Liberation from Egypt is not a one-off event, but the beginning of a way of life. This lifestyle is grounded in the living God who is beyond any possibility of exploitation by a humanly devised system or image. It ensures exodus-like social relationships where life, personal dignity and property are protected, and so it is concerned for the most vulnerable in society. It includes the gift of sabbath rest, in sharp contrast to Pharaoh’s regime of frenetic production and consumption. In just 17 verses, God outlines a communal vision by which divine revelation is incarnated in history and becomes recognizable by others.

Reflection

Who taught you the ‘Ten Commandments’?

In what way has your understanding of them matured during your life?

What insight do you take from today’s discussion, and how can it help you to live your life as a Christian?

1. German-Jewish Bible scholar (d. 1955). See Leibowitz, 307.

2. *Theology of the Old Testament*, 184.

Bibliography: Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, 1997); Larsson, *Bound for Freedom* (Mass., 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996); Sarna, ed., *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1991). Scripture: NRSV.

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