

About The Ten Commandments Scroll

The Ten Words

“And He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Words; and He wrote them upon two tablets of stone.” (Deuteronomy 4:13)

According to Exodus and as retold in Deuteronomy, immediately after the appearance of the God of Israel on Mount Sinai, He speaks to the Israelites in a set of remarks that are known as the “ten words.” These words, also called the Ten Commandments, are inscribed by God upon stone tablets. The text is understood to be the basic constitution of the community of Israel. The commandments are not intended as concrete legislation (or “laws”) but as a formulation of conditions for membership in the community, to be enforced by God, not by any human authority. They are essentially categorical imperatives — of universal validity, above time and independent of circumstances. The Ten Commandments comprise the most famous set of religious and ethical rules in the world.

The Ten Commandments: Law Code or Treaty?

Traditionally the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) has been viewed as a set of laws. But modern scholars recognize that the Decalogue takes the form of a treaty between the people Israel and their God. It appears to be modeled on ancient Near Eastern political treaties, imposed by a regional king on his conquered peoples.

The Decalogue contains all the essential elements of these treaties, including:

- The king’s introduction of himself by name. (“I am the LORD* your God.”)
- A prologue showing what the king has done for his people, thus establishing a debt. (“...who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”)
- A prime stipulation: that the people owe allegiance to this king alone. (“You shall not have other gods over Me.”)

- Further stipulations.

On this understanding, the Decalogue was not a catalogue of crimes but an agreement listing obligations and social rights, to be enforced by God in exchange for the exclusive obedience of the people Israel.

* LORD: the Tetragrammaton, the four-consonant name of God in the Hebrew Bible

What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 11 caves near the Dead Sea between 1947 and 1956 by Bedouin and archaeologists. They have been the centre of scholarly attention and debate ever since.

They are manuscripts, mostly on parchment, some on papyrus. Scholars believe that they were written between 250 BCE and 68 CE.

Over 900 manuscripts were discovered, written mostly in Hebrew but also Aramaic and Greek. A few were found in clay jars, but most lay on the floor of the caves. Most were in fragments that specialists took decades to piece together.

Around 200 of the Scrolls are biblical texts, including every book of the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) except Esther. Over 700 Scrolls are non-biblical texts, many previously unknown: apocryphal books (in biblical style but not included in the Bible), biblical commentaries, liturgical texts, apocalyptic predictions, regulations and beliefs of an unknown Jewish community, and many others.

Did you know?

The oldest known text of the Ten Commandments is the Nash Papyrus, discovered in Egypt. A Hebrew text, it dates to 150-100 BCE; the Ten Commandments scroll dates to 30-1 BCE. In the Nash Papyrus the Ten Commandments are followed by the start of the *Shema Yisrael* prayer ("Hear, O Israel...").

Why do some artists depict Moses with horns on his head?

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai the second time, the Torah tells us that "the skin of his face was radiant." The Hebrew word meaning "to be radiant" or "to cast a glow" is *karan*. In the 5th century CE, when Jerome composed the

Vulgate, the Catholic Church's Latin translation of the Bible, he took the verb *karan* to be a literal form of the noun *keren*, which means a horn. Vowels were not indicated in the original Hebrew text of the Bible, so the spelling of *karan* and *keren* would be identical: *krrn*.

The phrase "the Ten Commandments" does not appear anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. In Hebrew the Ten Commandments are called *debarim* (words or statements) and not *huqqim* (laws). The Bible speaks of *aseret hadibarim*, "the ten words."

In 1631, King Charles I of England ordered 1,000 Bibles from an English printer. When the printer inadvertently left out the word "not" in the seventh commandment (concerning adultery), the king ordered all the copies destroyed. This edition became known as the "Wicked Bible," and the few copies that have survived are worth a sizeable amount of money.

The phrase "the Ten Commandments" does not appear anywhere in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek version of the Hebrew Bible. Instead, it uses the phrase *hoi deka logoi*, "the ten words," from which we have the term Decalogue.

The commandment to honour one's parents is the only one that offers a reward – one that only God can offer: "that you may long endure, and that you may fare well."

The commandment not to worship any other gods is the only one that threatens a penalty – one that only God can inflict: "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon their sons to the third and fourth generations."

What happened to the two stone tablets that listed the Ten Commandments?

After receiving the commandments on Mount Sinai, Moses saw that the Israelites were worshipping an idol, the Golden Calf. In a fit of anger, Moses broke the tablets. God later carved two new tablets for Moses, which were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was eventually housed in the Jerusalem Temple built by Solomon, but it disappears from the biblical narrative after this. Some reason that the Ark and tablets were carried off when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in 586 BCE; others theorize that these items were spirited out of the country before the destruction. The fate and whereabouts of the tablets remain one of the Bible's great mysteries to this day.

Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 film “The Ten Commandments” was the second-highest grossing religious epic in history, earning over \$65.5 million in 1956 (\$446 million in contemporary figures). As a publicity stunt, DeMille erected public displays of the Ten Commandments around the U.S.A., mostly in or near government buildings. The film is usually slightly edited for TV transmission. This has led some humorists to comment that it has been “trimmed to seven commandments.”

Numbering the Commandments

Counting the commandments is actually quite difficult, because they consist of more than ten distinct directives, and the version in Exodus 20 differs slightly from that in Deuteronomy 5. Jewish and Christian interpreters have several contradictory divisions of the laws.

The following chart is a simplified summary of three major styles of enumeration. Some denominations do not fall exactly into these general categories. This exhibition follows the standard Jewish numbering system.

	Modern Jewish	Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican	Orthodox, most Protestant
I am the LORD your God...	1	[preface]	[preface]
You shall not have other gods...			1
You shall not make for yourself a statue or an image...	2	1	2
You shall not raise the name of the LORD your God in vain...	3	2	3
Observe the Sabbath day...	4	3	4
Honour your father and your mother...	5	4	5
You shall not murder.	6	5	6
You shall not commit adultery.	7	6	7
You shall not steal.	8	7	8
You shall not bear false witness...	9	8	9
You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife.	10	9	10
You shall not crave your neighbour’s house...		10	

Notes on the Text

The Scroll begins with Deuteronomy 8:5-10, which enjoins the people Israel to obey and praise God because He has given them a fruitful land. It then shifts to Deuteronomy 5, in which Moses reminds the people of the covenant that God made with them at Mount Horeb. The Ten Commandments follow. The text is longer than usual because it combines both versions of the Sabbath commandment: Deuteronomy 5:15, which instructs the Israelites to observe the Sabbath as a commemoration of their rescue from slavery in Egypt, and Exodus 20:11, which justifies the Sabbath observance as a remembrance of God's rest on the seventh day of creation. God then writes the commandments on the stone tablets. The people's leaders tell Moses that they will obey God, who reacts by promising Moses that the people will prosper as long as they follow His commands (Deuteronomy 5:22-32). The Scroll breaks off after Deuteronomy 6:1.

Significance of the Scroll

This Scroll is the oldest parchment record of the Ten Commandments, and is the best-preserved Deuteronomy manuscript among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Because the verses from Deuteronomy 8 appear in the Scroll before those from chapter 5, it is thought that this text may have been used in prayer, and is not necessarily a fragment of a copy of the entire book of Deuteronomy.

Points of Interest

This well-preserved manuscript contains four complete and two partially-damaged columns. The second through sixth columns are written on one long leather sheet. The surface of the leather is very thin and reddish-brown. Horizontal lines are visible on the long leather sheet, with guiding dots visible on Column II.

The Ten Commandments and the Abrahamic Faiths

The Nash Papyrus and the Dead Sea Scrolls phylacteries suggest that the Ten Commandments have had a liturgical significance within Judaism from at least the Second Temple period. According to Jewish tradition, God gave the Jewish people 613 *mitzvot* (commandments), all equally sacred and binding. The Ten Commandments are counted among the 613 *mitzvot*, but also function as the ideological basis for the remaining 603; each of the 603 can be subsumed under one of the Ten Commandments.

For Christians, the Ten Commandments provide both religious and ethical guidelines. The New Testament does not contain the full Decalogue, but individual precepts are cited throughout the text. The Decalogue foreshadows Jesus' "double love commandment," which requires love of God and love of neighbour.

The Qur'an includes equivalents of most of the Commandments, and appears to refer to the Decalogue as a whole: "And We ordained laws for him [Musa*] in the tablets in all matters, both commanding and explaining all things, (and said): 'Take and hold these with firmness, and enjoin thy people to hold fast by the best in the precepts'" (sura 7, verse 145).

* Musa: Moses

An Influence across the Ages

Of the numerous laws presented in the Hebrew Bible, the most famous are the Ten Commandments. These laws have influenced Judaism and Christianity for centuries, as well as the societies that have hosted these religions. What is so resonant about this group of laws that it has commanded such attention? It may be the dramatic biblical tale that introduces the Ten Commandments, which speaks of the climb up Mount Sinai, where Moses experiences an extraordinarily rare personal view of God. Perhaps it is the shattering of the tablets and the loss of God's own writing that has captured people's imaginations. Or maybe it is the importance of having a central moral code to help situate people regarding their faith and their life in society.

Consider these few examples of the lasting effects of the Ten Commandments on Western secular culture:

- the rule of law
- equality before the law
- the right not to be cheated, defrauded, or defamed
- the protection of one's physical integrity
- the protection of property
- parental rights over children
- a weekly day of rest
- the view of adultery as undesirable
- references to God (or the Creator or Supreme Being) in constitutions and other legal documents
- the swearing of oaths in court (on a Holy Book, or in the name of God)