

*Director's Signature Lecture Series: Three New Commandments*

**Christopher Hitchens**

**Royal Ontario Museum**

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*[Podcast begins with ROM theme music and sound sting]*

**William Thorsell, Director and CEO, Royal Ontario Museum:** Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Royal Ontario Museum. My name is William Thorsell; I have the honour to be the director of this wonderful place in these very interesting years. Welcome to your museum, the "O" means Ontario, you own it and we're delighted to see you here this evening for the first in a number of sessions that go into the ideas behind the Dead Sea Scrolls.

For the past nine years or so, we at the ROM have been in the business of rebuilding much of the physical infrastructure of this place, renovating the original wings around us here, building anew out here in the Daniel Libeskind design, Michael Lee Crystal, and reaching into our 6 million or so specimens and objects to bring them out in much more profusion into all sorts of new galleries. All this was necessary for any museum that is defined by its collections and has fallen behind on their accessibility, many collections stranded up in the vaults or down in the vaults. But this hardware phase of what we've been doing is coming to an end as we near completion and sets the stage for a more complete picture now at this museum. That picture must include what you might call the software, much more of the software, what those collections are all about, what they mean, the intellectual fabric of the place and the implications of all of this. This evening marks a clear shift, I think, into a mature balance between the hardware of our buildings and galleries and the software of what their content tells us about the world or incites us to think differently about the world. The ROM is this rare genus of a museum that embraces both mandates of world cultures and natural history, nature and society, very rare in the world under one roof and that invites even more integrated thinking and debating.

Last night in this space, some of you might have been here, the ROM was one of the sponsors of the Munk debates, this time on the efficacy of foreign aid around the world, a wonderful night of intellectual firepower and forcing us to think differently against our presuppositions. Tonight we begin seven months of discussions and lectures inspired by the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition which opens later this month. These texts of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament and the

stories which are included in the Qur'an which serve among the foundation documents of our civilization for better or for worse. Could we stop, as a museum in Canada's leading city, the physical display of these texts in the context only of archaeology? I think not. This is explicitly an exhibition about values and ideas. We will offer in our scholarly lecture series 14 speakers in the Anne Tanenbaum lecture series on various aspects of these scrolls from archaeology and sociology throughout the next seven months. But more to the point, tonight we will start this evening with a more open-ended and challenging presentation that clears the air of what I would call cumulated reverence in the service of intellectual vigour and rigor, in the service of using the fact of an exhibition to become more thoughtful about the nature of its content, then and today. This is the museum perhaps as the agora in the modern world, a place where we not only describe what we have but try to engage with you in what we have.

Now the earliest written expression is the Ten Commandments, the earliest known in the world, will be on display here for 80 hours in the middle of October as part of our exhibition with the Dead Sea Scrolls. In essence the Ten Commandments describe basic rules for living a good life, in the views of those who wrote them, in relation to a god in the first point and in relation to each other. I think this is interesting whether or not you believe in a God since the end of the Second World War, much of our public life is focused on human rights. From the American civil rights movement to anti-colonialism, feminism, Communism, the rights of children, the Ten Commandments represent the more traditional focus on human obligations, how to live morally and properly within the parameters of your own soul.

It so happens that the ROM already has one very important scroll on exhibition here, our own Egyptian Book of the Dead, which we unfurled and brought to life for the first time in 2,300 years only last summer. It had been lying in a drawer upstairs for 100 years and we finally unrolled it, it was like finding that big dinosaur we did a couple years ago. Much of the text in this book, which was buried with the deceased, also speaks to rules for living well, in this case, 42 rules in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. In part, the deceased says before the judge, (quote out of the Book of the Dead of Egypt), "I have not done falsehood against men, I have not impoverished my associates, I have not deprived the orphan of his property, I have not caused pain, I have not made hungry, I have not made to weep, I have not killed, I have not commanded to kill." Now that's quite familiar if you know the Ten Commandments which were copied at about the same time as that Book of the Dead, that's about 280 BC, but the Egyptian goes on to say, in addition to what he said there, before his judge, "I have not deprived the herds of their pastures, I have not trapped the birds from the preserves of the gods, I have not caught the fish of their marshlands, I have not diverted water at its season, I

have not built a dam on flowing water, I have not quenched the fire when it is burning." So the Egyptian had to be something of an environmentalist to get to Heaven. No such demand appears in the core commandments of Deuteronomy. The Greeks tended to derive their rules for living from more cerebral arguments, one might say of Socrates that logic was his divinity and thus his rules exhibited more consistency and perhaps wisdom, it might be said, even as they allowed for challenge and change over time. Socrates too is part of the foundations of our values and ideas. So what of these Ten Commandments, so carefully recorded in the Dead Sea Scrolls, their content, their source, their quality, what is there and what is missing?

**Christopher Hitchens:** Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me William – I'm going to be talking about this.

[Laughter]

**William Thorsell:** I'm about to introduce him. We could think of no one more engaging. Just in time, delivery, engaging in both the serious and provocative sense of that word to explore these questions, Christopher Hitchens. Even if he had not written *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Mr. Hitchens would have been exactly the right choice to launch these months of thinking and re-thinking because he is an erudite, fearless, and entertaining thinker about many, many things. How fortunate we are to welcome him here tonight, two years after the publication of this particular book, one of many he's done, where he specifically addresses the Ten Commandments among other highlights in various religious texts. Just in conclusion in his book, Mr. Hitchens also discusses the famous Burgess Shale fossils, evidence for the Cambrian explosion of complex life in the ocean some 520 million years ago. It so happens that the ROM, this museum, is the largest holder of these fossils in the world, which suggests that it is a cosmopolitan museum indeed, attended by cosmopolitan audience I think, indeed, to be addressed by a cosmopolitan individual, Mr. Christopher Hitchens.

[Applause]

**Christopher Hitchens:** Thank you, William for that unpardonably terse and economical introduction, [hearty laughter] grudging, almost in its brevity. Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen for coming, thank you to the ROM, some of whose wonderful collections I've had the opportunity to tour today. I'd like to dedicate such merit as this lecture may possess to the memory of the great Thomas Paine, the bicentennial of whose death will fall on the 8<sup>th</sup> of this month, next week. Thomas Paine, his words having originated the American Revolution, and tried to

make it more radical by calling for the abolition of slavery, also played a good part in the French Revolution and tried to make it less absolutist by opposing, for example, the application of capital punishment to members of the former regime, and said rather beautifully that to have had a part in two revolutions was to have lived to some purpose. He also is the originator, at least in the popular mind, of biblical criticism. His *Age of Reason* was the first attempt to bring within the purview of those who were just learning to read, the newly literate, the artisan caste, the idea that the one book that they all knew, the holy text, might not be holy writ after all.

I was Xeroxing a couple of pages of Deuteronomy yesterday in my hotel, looking exactly as I look now, and of course as you start to do that it runs out of paper and malfunctions so I had to summon one of the very nice clerks at the hotel who said as he laid the Holy Bible flat and ran off some Deuteronomy for me and some Leviticus, "What are you...are you preparing a sermon?" *[Laughter]* And I said to myself and to him, I cannot tell a lie, I said to him (and then because I cannot tell a lie), I said, "Yeah. You might say that."

Now a word of preparation, Gore Vidal was once sitting next to Sir Noel Coward and said to him, as one massive old darling to another, *[laughter]* "Are you telling me you've absolutely never, never, never had sexual contact at all of any kind with any woman?"

And Noel Coward said, "Certainly not."

And Gore said, "You mean not even with Gertrude Lawrence?"

And Noel Coward said, "Particularly not with Miss Lawrence."

*[Soft laughter]*

Well I am a critic of all religions and of all faiths, but the one with which I particularly don't agree is the one in which I was raised, and the one which I loved, love still, that is to say the Anglican communion, the Cranmer prayer book, the English hymnal, and the King James Bible, so when I make any references in direct quotation or speech, it will be to that and not some terrible "Good News" text from heaven knows where.

*[Laughter]*

Those of you who have that tradition in common by the way, with me, will remember, I hope, Arthur Hugh Clough, and "*Say not the struggle naught availeth,*" you remember his Decalogue, it's a very fine piece of mid-Victorian work, "Adultery do not commit, advantage rarely comes of it, though shalt not kill but needs not strive officiously to keep alive." So it goes on, there's almost a Swiftian thing. Given that it's written by the man who wrote "*Say not the struggle*

*naught availeth*", I think it's rather impressive. I mention it before I move on to my own re-reading and re-casting of the Ten Commandments. I want briefly just to say why it is the subject is such a compelling and such an essential one. All the great questions that divide theology from philosophy are finally, I think, reducible to two questions.

First, is it true, as is definitively stated in Genesis, chapter 1, verse 27, that at one time, one God created man or mankind in his own image? Or, is it rather the case that many men at several times and in many places created many, many gods, and continued to create many gods in their own images? As you'll see, a lot more hangs on that than just the very important shift from the singular to the plural.

Second question is this: is our sense of right and wrong, our knowledge of right and wrong, if you prefer good and evil, is it proper to ourselves, is it innate to us, is it our pride, our property, or does it come to us as a gift from revelation, is it part of a covenant with a supernatural authority? So you'll please to bear in mind as I go on that those two central questions underlie every word of this text and every examination of it. Now it's not as easy as many people including Clough may have thought to isolate and identify ten commandments and then just do your own version of the Decalogue.

To begin with, the Commandments appear three times at least in the Old Testament. And they are, in their several and discrepant appearances, they're embedded in great slabs of prose, which also mainly consist of orders, commands, other forms of edicts or ukase often very minutely spelled out and very highly codified and specified.

For example, not to get too far ahead of myself, the first iteration of the Ten Commandments in Exodus, chapter 20 is almost immediately followed by an obsessively detailed spelling out of the codes governing ox-goring, a code which incorporates the famous equivalencies of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, depending famously on whose ox is being gored and which, just as the goring is starting to get boring, perhaps even boring to its almighty author, swerves off very abruptly at a complete tangent and says "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," which also has the force of divine law and all of it has the status of commandment, and all of it was used as Christians as such, and Jews, and was used as a direct mandate until the incineration of the last witch – a process that's still going on in some parts of the world, most notably in Africa...And an event in our history that we have good and sad reason to know is still quite distressingly recent, so it's quite difficult to know where the Ten, the Decalogue of

Commandments leaves off and the other instructions, ukases, and edicts, so to say, kick in.

Anyway the first and the best-known version, the one we think we're talking about, or you thought we would be talking about until you got here, appears in Exodus, chapter 20. There's then a sulphurous interlude in which Moses, or after which Moses, smashes the original tablets, smashes the tablets inscribed by the finger of God. After that there's a reprise of the commandments in Exodus 34, but by no means an identical one, and then after many wanderings and many sufferings on the part of Moses and his followers, the entire business, the whole Decalogue is again redone and restated in Deuteronomy, chapter 5.

A lot of people are surprised to hear this, they shouldn't be um...the Pentateuch to the Torah has within its books 2 different accounts of the Creation story, 2 separate genealogies of the seed of Adam, and 2 complete discrepant stories of Noah's flood. Bear this in mind because we're coming back to it. So without forgetting these impending revisions that are coming to us, let's take the original version of the commandments anyway in their due order and see where they lead us.

Now the first thing you'll notice is that the business takes 16 verses, not 10, and the first injunction has very little to do with morality, if anything, and a lot to do with *amour propre* of the lawgiver himself. And nor is it self-evident that the very ciclensions or the throat-clearing of the First Commandment are the same. No graven images are to be made, of any living thing on heaven or earth or in the water, isn't that one commandment? Possibly. No prostrations are to be made before any such image, which is not quite the same, is it, as the prohibition upon their manufacture. And the punishment here, which isn't cited for any of the other of the transgressions, is specified, is that the fourth generation of the offender's children will be penalized for his sins. Some might say that the idea of punishing successive generations is a repulsive one, or at least not necessarily a moral one, it's more a frightening one than a moral injunction and therefore it's not a surprise to find stipulated by the Lord that he is a jealous God, as the King James version has it, the authorized version, and will not allow other deities to be put on equal footing with him. Again a little depends here on which translation one's employing but it is permissible to speculate that Yahweh knows that there are other gods, or at least suspects that there may be other gods and resents them or anyone turning their affections in that direction. In other words, it's odd that this should be considered the foundational government of monotheism since there appears to be someone who's uneasily, not to say uncomfortably aware of the polytheistic possibilities of reality. After all, it's not so surprising again, I address myself here to

people who like to rest their case on miracles, in Egypt itself earlier, the pharaonic priests had agreed to a duel with Aaron about miracles, which both of them could produce, so the ability to produce a miracle testifies to the validity of no particular faith. Their conjuring could produce great wonders also. So what we appear to be looking at is an angry competition for monopoly affection among an oligopoly of potential deities, somewhat more like the cruelty and caprice of Olympus, and the story is told by the already terrified fans of the apparent winner.

So if you like, you can call all of that one commandment, but it seems to me to be multiple ones and multiple injunctions. You still, with the jealousy and with the vanity and the caprice, you still have a separate commandment on not taking the Lord's name in vain, and once again it's all backed up with the specific threat that offenses will not be soon forgiven, in fact let me quickly, if I can find it quickly, not waste the time of that very nice Xerox operator, actually read it to you as it occurs in the King James version, both of these multiple commandments:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in Heaven above or that is in the Earth beneath or that is in the water beneath the Earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous god, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children of the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.

So you might think someone who keeps the commandments won't have their children persecuted unto the next generations so that if the next generation of children didn't keep the commandments they'd still be protected by the fact that their parents had kept the commandments, but no, no... "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that take of his name in vain," right, see where I'm going with that. All of this suggesting a great insecurity and unease, then comes the requirement again tediously repeated for the observance of the Sabbath Day, "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy, six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God, in it thou shalt not do any work, thou nor thy son," – I may as well finish this – "...nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger which is within thy gates."

Uncontroversial in itself, a day off, but again, having nothing to do in this case with ethics or morality, but only with the fear of the Lord; it is only obedience to that fear that is moral, and it's interesting as marking, not for the first time or the last, those to whom it applies; male bosses and employers are the ones addressed,

and their menservants and maidservants, nor their cattle are permitted to work on Sunday, or the Shabbat, a confusion between people and chattel that is going to recur again very soon.

Indeed, if anything can show you that there's a good argument that the commandments are man-made and not God-ordained, it would be the general Exodus emphasis on agriculture and sheep and lamb and goat products in general.

I had a debate on the BBC recently with Canon Slee, one of the deputies of the Archbishop of Canterbury, in which I said that one of the things I disliked about Christianity when I was quite small was having to think of myself as a member of a flock, in other words, as a sheep or lamb, and also having to reflect that shepherds don't look after sheep just because they like them, though some shepherds like them much too much, *[laughter]* but in order that they can first fleece them and then kill them. And Slee, to his credit, he took me up on it rather decently, he said, "You know, it was a problem for us with the church in New Guinea where I served for a considerable time, because, as with a huge number of areas of the world, there are no sheep in New Guinea." Exodus is limited in that way too, even the animals it describes aren't available everywhere. So he said, "we had to work out what the locals in New Guinea valued as the Israelites would have valued sheep," he said, "and it got to the point where one Easter I saw my Bishop get up into the pulpit and address his congregation and say, in English to them, 'O Lord behold these your swine.'" *[Laughter]* So you see how off the track you can get, how off the beaten track you get with agricultural metaphors and how confining they can be, and of course it would have to be a pig, the very one that Yahweh elegantly condemns elsewhere. I say, if this is God-made, it looks somewhat man-made all the same.

Furthermore, if one day and only one day is holy, it can suggest that others are profane, and that's led to a good deal of fetishism of the Sabbath and of Shabbat. I remember when I used to work in Northern Ireland, trying to point out to the Reverend Ian Paisley, I worked for a Sunday show at the time, he wouldn't be interviewed by anyone whose show or newspaper came out on Sunday, so I tried to point out to him, "Reverend, it's the Monday papers that are printed on the Sunday," *[laughter]* and I could see his piggy eyes sort of narrowing as he took this in. It took him a long, long time before he'd give an interview to the Observer but in the end, reason prevailed.

So why not just say that the worker deserves one day off in seven? Why say that it's necessary only because the Lord, who effortlessly made Heaven and Earth in

six days, doing what came naturally, rested on the seventh? Anyway, make a note of this stipulation, small though it may seem, because it's coming back. It's crucially varied in the Deuteronomy version.

All right, moving right along, the next five Commandments are famously brisk and terse with the slight exception of the order to honour one's parents because that comes not with the threat of punishment but with an inducement this time, "Obey it and thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." So once again, one's forced to notice, these rules are not being observed for their own sake or because they're innately and self-evidently moral, they're being urged, either to avoid the punishment of four generations of one's children, or in order to be given land that until now had belonged to Canaanites and other lesser breeds. They come to us in other words, not as precepts of morality, but as accompanied and body-guarded by a mixture of threats and promises. And it's interesting to notice that parents are nowhere told that they must be good to their children, but there may be a good reason for that too and I'm coming back to that also. You'll forgive this fan-dance of mine, promising you things down the road, if you don't shuffle too much.

OK, then the celebrated Commandments against murder, adultery, theft, and perjury follow without any adornment, with any bribe or threat. The King James Version famously says, "Thou shalt not kill," though the original Hebrew makes it very obvious that the meaning is "Thou shalt do no murder." These transliterations, by the way, can be very hazardous and very useful. The Hebrew word *almah*, for example, means young woman, that's all it means. When mistranslated by King James' committee as virgin, it very much alters the idea that a young woman will one day conceive and bring forth a son, and a great deal of misunderstanding has resulted from that error in translation.

I'm reminded of the Lady Governor of Texas, who during a controversy about bilingualism in the Statehouse in Austin said if English was good enough for Jesus Christ it was plenty good enough for her [*Laughter*]. We so far haven't found any society in which the penal code- we've looked, anthropologists have searched - we've found no society in which the penal code approves of or is neutral about murder, or theft, or perjury. Adultery is treated differently in different cultures, but murder, theft and perjury are not.

One might argue that the Jewish people wouldn't have made it as far as they did, to Mt. Sinai, assuming it was that they did make the trip, if they had been under the impression that murder, theft, perjury, adultery were okay until they got there. The analects of Confucius mention the Golden Rule, or they have a version of it,

they say don't do to another person what would be repulsive to you if done to yourself. The Babylonian rabbi, Hillel more or less states the same thing, when asked if you can summarize the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot, he says, "Yes I can: don't do to another what would be repellent if done to you. There is the law, all else is commentary." The Egyptian Book of the Dead, which was already mentioned, which you can go see, um, Moses, I might just add to the excellent gloss that William put on it, Moses was supposed to have been, according the story, a prince in Egypt, he would have had to know Egyptian law, if he was a real person and if the story has any factual base, he would have had to know what someone would have had to testify in the Book of the Dead what someone had not done or indeed had done, he would have had to know the quite sophisticated Egyptian court system of which we have reasonably good records. At least a thousand years before Exodus was written down, that's to say at least a thousand years before 1400 BC, Hammurabi promulgates the code of law, in Babylon, not far away, that becomes pretty celebrated particularly for its emphasis on the *lex talionis*, so-called, in other words the concept of direct symbolic retribution, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

So even if we had any reason to believe that the story of the enslavement in Egypt was true, or the wandering in the desert was true, or the conquest of the promised land was true, or that there was ever such a place as Mt. Sinai, and Israeli archaeologists have made it increasingly impossible to regard any such view as tenable, even if we took it as read, there'd be still nothing morally unique or special or first-time in any of the versions, the three versions of the Old Testament Decalogue, or perhaps there would be, perhaps there might be. The tenth commandment prohibits all manner of covetousness and envy and it repeats the usual lumping in of a neighbour's women-folk with his beasts of burden. You can't covet your neighbour's ass, you can't covet your neighbour's wife, or his ox, um...repeating earlier injunctions about the Sabbath, which make cattle and chattel much the same thing, including human chattel. But you note that in the tenth commandment, unlike the others, there's no specific action that's being either condemned or recommended, neither enjoined nor exhorted or forbidden or prohibited. Instead, we've got the first recorded instance that I know of, of thought crime, it's not that you're not supposed to do it, it's you're not even supposed to think about it.

This is why those of us who maintain a critique of religion, make the charge that it is implicitly totalitarian; it can convict you for things that are only in your head, for thoughts that have hardly begun to form. And there's another reason, I think why this commandment is somewhat sinister, it appears to forbid the poor from resenting the rich, if you want to make a left critique of it, or, if you want to

approach matters from a free market point of view, it seems to crush the spirit of emulation and competition that's involved in wishing you had a better life. Some Jewish authors have argued that the prohibition only extends to actual neighbours in the sense of those who dwell in the immediate vicinity. And some have said that it only applies to covetousness of that sort, but it would surely be a very paltry commandment that excused the exact same attitude if it were directed at people further away. And only then do you notice when that thought has occurred to you, in the mind that you have that's always alive with subversive thinking, you suddenly notice that the children of Israel are precisely and all the time being ordered to covet, being enjoined to covet, being told they must envy and hope to annex the lands, the flocks, the herds, and the women of neighbouring tribes. They're kept going by greed, by the thought soon all these people's property will be yours, and that you'll be licensed to take it by force, and kill them and have the land and not the people. This is perhaps why, this ambition is perhaps why, there are no prohibitions against say, slavery, or rape, or genocide, or child abuse in the Ten Commandments. It's not a matter of leaving these out or applying situational ethics to a time that was not ours it's not that, I don't think so, such things have always been known of and usually deplored. It's more, I fear, that such terrible things as rape, enslavement, genocide, and child abuse, are just about to be mandatory, they're just about to be forced on people, as things that they are, not just must not do, but must do, if the conquest is to continue.

The remainder of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, of the Pentateuch in other words, is largely taken up with exact codification of the different kinds of enslavement of Jewish servants and non-Jewish serfs, the conditions of mass murder and despoilment of the neighbouring tribes, *neighbouring* tribes, there are also incidental and so to say, by the way commandments such as the one to stone to death any child that disrespects its parents and the prohibition on seething a baby goat in its mother's milk, one of those random commandments on which the whole laborious edifice of Kosher and Kashrut has since been raised.

So, let's just trace again, to be sure where we are amid this blizzard of conflicting hysterical orders, the evolutions of the Decalogue. After the commandments specified in Exodus, chapter 20 comes Exodus 21, a chapter of so-called judgments which gives the verdict and sentence in advance, for any number of crimes, from smiting to slave rebellion and from ox-goring to witchcraft and these too have the forces of commandment and the penalty, in all cases, is death. Moses then returns from his audience with God to discover his people have lapsed into calf-worship and other frivolities. As I mentioned earlier, he thereupon smashes the two tablets, which would surely at that time, have been the most precious artefact that could possibly be known to man, as having been conceived and made holy

by God, smashes them, and summons the Levites of his contingent to inflict exemplary punishment. And I quote now from Exodus 32, verses 27-38, "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel" – so this too, is a divine Commandment, by the way, "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, put every man his sword by his side and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp and slay every man his brother and every man his companion and every man his neighbour. And the children of Levi did according to the Law of Moses and there fell of the people that day about 3,000 men." So that's a terrific slaughter under orders and you note the small inconsistency which may perhaps, I sometimes think, betray the prickings of a poor conscience. In the first verse the order for the indiscriminate slaughter is from God, "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel." In the second, it's from Moses, "The children of Levi did according to the word of Moses," there's a bit of displacement going on here, we don't know. In either case, it orders the killing of brothers, companions, and in that significant term as we've seen from the tenth Commandment, neighbours, specified, they must die, without pity, without discrimination.

That's not excessive perhaps, after the infanticide of the first-born of Egypt that's already taken place for them to get this far, and it pales beside the anger of Moses in the later book of Numbers where he speaks to his generals after Battle against the Amalchites and rages at them for sparing so many of the civilians. Now therefore he says, "Kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that has known a man by lying with him, but all those women-children that hath not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves."

In *Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine drew attention to this passage saying that it constituted – I'm quoting Paine – "An order to butcher the boys, to massacre the mothers, and to debauch the daughters," a fairly good summary of what I've just read. And this earned him a hurt and high-minded rejoinder from the Bishop of Llandaff, a blithering Welshman who used to try to debate Paine on these questions. He didn't contest the butchery of the boys or the massacre of the mothers but he did say very plangently that it wasn't actually stipulated that the daughters were being kept alive for immoral purposes. In other words, the Bishop left open the possibility that they were being kept as, I suppose, pets. *[Laughter]*

Anyway, after the Levite massacre has showed the Jews whose boss, the new tablets are inscribed and presented. In Exodus 34 Verse 38, these are for the first time, and the only time actually, and only in other words in the second occasion, directly referred to as the "Ten Commandments," but they're almost entirely different from the first version. They are preceded by a ban on inter-marriage between Jews and Canaanites, Jews and Hittites, Jews and Amorites, Jews and Jebusites, et cetera, lest mixing of blood should mar the Covenants, sort of an early

racist injunction. Then the tablets repeat the commandments concerning the Sabbath and concerning idol-worship and then everything becomes micro-management of unleavened bread, first fruits of the harvest, etiquette to conduct around the Tabernacle, the observance of Passover, and the aforementioned separation of meat from dairy products in the Glatt Kosher kitchen, highly insipid when compared to the ten or twelve or thirteen or twenty or so verses before. But nonetheless, the only ones now remaining to the children of Israel that are written in stone, because the tablets are back, an inconsistency that so far no one's been able to explain. And thus matters persist until the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy where Moses assembles the masses and gives them the first, that's the Exodus 20 version, all over again, that's the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, five books later on, no, four books later on. It's very nearly an exact repeat except this time the Sabbath Day is to be kept as holy, not because God made Heaven and Earth in six days and then rested on the seventh, but because God brought his people out of the land of Egypt. So it's still to be kept holy but the reason why it's holy is entirely different. And twenty-two chapters later, as the Jordan River draws nearer, and as the book of Deuteronomy draws to its close, there is yet a fourth set of commandments, issued by Moses who orders that they too be inscribed on stone. And these take the form of twelve curses, you should look them up, forcefully intoned by Levite priests, "Cursed," for example, "is he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way, cursed is he that lies with any manner of beast, cursed is he that lieth with his father's wife," that's by the way for the intriguingly Oedipal reason that he "uncovereth his father's skirt."

One is compelled here to re-examine the authorship of Deuteronomy, which tells us that Moses by then had reached the age of 120, adding that his eye was not dimmed nor his natural force abated. One begins to doubt it because it seems that like many elderly men he'd begun to repeat his favourite stories *[laughter]* to captive audiences that were naturally a touch shy about interrupting him and not always remembering the stories precisely the same way. A bit the same with some of the incantations. So, I don't want to trespass on the time that we shall have to discuss these great questions together but I'll just try and pull my threads to a conclusion by returning to the questions I asked at the beginning: Did God make man or did man make God and does morality come from on high? Or not?

To the first question, the study of the so-called Ten Commandments allows us to return a pretty confident reply. The whole story is one of muddle, chaos, inconsistency, revision as one goes along, temper tantrums, lapses into rage, insanity, sadism, vengeance, and general losing of the thread. This would argue either for a very muddled, irrational, forgetful, inconsistent god or for no god at all. But if we make the assumption that this massive unresolved contradiction was

the outcome of the ignorant struggles of a semi-literate, frightened species of primates, then the mystery clears up all by itself.

And thus too I think Thomas Paine is vindicated when he writes in the *Age of Reason* and writes about the Pentateuch that these books are spurious and that Moses is not the author of them, and still further that they were not written in the time of Moses, not till several hundred years after, that they were an attempted history of the life of Moses and of the times in which he is said to have lived and also of the times prior thereto, written by some very ignorant stupid pretenders, several hundred years after the death of Moses, as men now write histories of things that happened or are supposed to have happened several hundred or several thousand years ago. As to whether we need Heaven's permission and revelation to be able to distinguish right from wrong, those who believe that this is so are on uncomfortable or untenable ground, I think, if they take their stand on the mosaic Decalogue, or rather on the various discrepant versions of the Decalogue. The Decalogue is a record of callousness and greed and cruelty, in which one tribe seeks to claim a divine warrant for the crimes which, crimes against humanity which, it fully intends to commit in any case, and goes on to commit, this time under the leadership of Joshua, with every sign of relish at its own propensity for genocide.

So how could this wretched state of affairs be amended? I've been challenged and asked to update and extend the Decalogue. Well, I think we might as well first have a standardized ten, which at present we don't. Out of a possible ten, as people say, a maximum of four have anything to do with morality, and these are all "shalt not" type of commandments; they're prohibitions. If I'm permitted my own wish-list and if I'm allowed to update Arthur Hugh Clough and produce the latest Decalogue, I don't think I'll propose a New Testament-style update of the sort that orders us to love one another, because call me old-fashioned if you will, the idea of mandatory, compulsory love has always struck me as a rather sickly one, or a rather sinister one, especially when it originates as an injunction from a godhead of which, or of whom, you're also supposed to be afraid. To be ordered to love someone of whom you have to be in dread is a form of sado-masochism. It's the essence of Orwell's Big Brother cult; it's not enough to obey, you have to love the obeisance as well. It's the seed there of the totalitarian. Love cannot be exacted.

But one might argue in searching for a new code, that at the very least we might enact some stern prohibitions. It's not just our modern sensibilities I think, or our consciousness of the fragility of our survival as a species that might incline us now, if we were drawing up a code, to forbid slavery, to condemn genocide, the rape and torture of children, and the despoliation of the natural order of the world. I

hope that these might be considered, in Benjamin Franklin's great words, contributed to Thomas Jefferson's great preamble, self-evident.

Unfortunately though, we can't do this by amending this book, because slavery, genocide, and the rape and torture of children are not merely not denounced in the first five books of the Old Testament, they are rather very enthusiastically recommended. So if we search for ways of doing the right thing, we're consulting the wrong book and we're looking for morality in all the wrong places. Perhaps though, there is still something to be salvaged and if so, it might be found in the long, vainglorious, menacing throat-clearings of the very first commandment. We might give some real thought to the prohibition on the making of idols and of images, we might do well to stop forging manacles with our own minds, and setting up impressions and images of ourselves as if they were divine and rarefied and supernatural. We might cease to make whips for our own backs; we might stop making tyrants and despots in our own image. We have rights as well as duties in respect to one another, and as one can intuit from Thomas Paine, in order to safeguard and enjoy the rights of man, we shall require a new age of reason. Thank you.

*[Applause]*

*[Podcast ends with ROM sound sting]*