

TEN COMMANDMENTS. The ‘ten words’ (Heb. *dēbārîm*; cf. Ex. 34:28; Dt. 4:13; 10:4) were originally uttered by the divine voice from Sinai in the hearing of all Israel (Ex. 19:16–20:17). Afterwards, they were twice written by the finger of God on both sides of two tables of stone (Ex. 31:18; 32:15–16; 34:1, 28; cf. Dt. 10:4). Moses shattered the first pair, symbolizing Israel’s breaking of the covenant by the sin of the golden calf (Ex. 32:19). The second pair were deposited in the ark (Ex. 25:16; 40:20). Later, Moses republished the Ten Commandments in slightly modified form (Dt. 5:6–21).

The common designation of the contents of the two tables as ‘the Decalogue’, though it has biblical precedent, has tended to restrict unduly the general conception of their nature. To classify this revelation as law is not adequate; it belongs to the broader category of covenant. The terminology ‘covenant’ (Heb. *bērît*; Dt. 4:13) and ‘the words of the covenant’ (Ex. 34:28; cf. Dt. 29:1, 9) is applied to it. It is also identified as the ‘testimony’ (Heb. *‘ēdūt*; Ex. 25:16, 21; 40:20; cf. 2 Ki. 17:15), which describes the covenant order of life as one solemnly imposed and sworn to so that *‘ēdūt* becomes practically synonymous with *bērît*. The two tables are called ‘the tables of the covenant’ (Dt. 9:9, 11, 15) or ‘testimony’ (Ex. 31:18; 32:15; 34:29).

The historical occasion of the original giving of this revelation was the estab-

lishment of the theocratic covenant. The principles of Ex. 20:2–17 as elaborated and applied in casuistic form in the book of the covenant (Ex. 20:22–23:33) served as a legal instrument in the ratification of that covenant (Ex. 24:1–8). The later, Deuteronomic, version is part of a document of covenant renewal.

When, therefore, the Scripture designates the revelation of the two tables as ‘the ten words’, it clearly does so as *pars pro toto*. At the same time, this terminology and the preponderance of law content which it reflects indicates that the type of covenant involved is essentially the establishment of a kingdom order under the lordship of the covenant suzerain.

The covenantal character of the Decalogue is illuminated and corroborated by ancient international treaties of the type used to formalize the relationship of a suzerain and vassal (*COVENANT). Suzerainty treaties began with a preamble identifying the covenant lord, the speaker (cf. Ex. 20:2a), and a historical prologue recounting especially the benefits previously bestowed on the vassal through the favour and might of the lord (cf. Ex. 20:2b). The obligations imposed on the vassal, the longest section, followed. The foremost stipulation was the requirement of loyalty to the covenant lord or negatively the proscription of all alien alliances (cf. Ex. 20:3–17, the first and great principle of which is whole-

hearted love of Yahweh, who is a jealous God). Another section enunciated the curses and blessings which the gods of the covenant oath would visit on the vassals in accordance with their transgressions or fidelity. These sanctions were sometimes interspersed among the stipulations (cf. [Ex. 20:5b](#), [6](#), [7b](#), [12b](#)). Among other parallels are the 'I-thou' style, the practice of placing a copy of the treaty in the sanctuaries of the two parties, and the administrative policy of renewing the covenant with the successive generations of the vassal kingdom. In covenant renewal documents, modification of the stipulations to meet new conditions was customary. That explains the various differences between the [Ex. 20](#) and [Dt. 5](#) forms of the Decalogue. For example, [Dt. 5:21](#) adds 'his field' because of the relevance of land ownership to Israel's now imminent inheritance of Canaan.

In brief, the two tables contained the essence of the Sinaitic Covenant. Yahweh, Creator of heaven, earth, sea and all that is in them, is presented as covenant Suzerain. The theocratic covenant relationship is traced to Yahweh's redemptive election and deliverance, and its continuance to the thousandth generation is attributed to his faithful mercies. The covenant way of life is sovereignly dictated in ten commandments, the standard of Israel's consecration to her Lord.

The very fact that the law is embedded in divine covenant disclosure points to

the religious principle of personal devotion to God as the heart of true fulfilment of the law. But there is no incompatibility between the divine demand communicated in concrete imperatives and the call of God to personal commitment to him in love. Yahweh describes the beneficiaries of his covenant mercy as 'those who love me and keep my commandments' ([Ex. 20:6](#); cf. [Jn. 14:15](#)). The biblical ethic is rooted in biblical religion, and biblical religion is not shapeless mysticism but a structured order.

The revelation of the law in the context of redemptive covenant action indicates that conformity to the law must be a gracious accomplishment of Yahweh, saving from bondage. In this context even the preponderantly negative form of the Decalogue serves to magnify the grace of God, who presents this protest against man's sin not as a final condemnation but as a summons to the godliness which is the goal of restored covenantal communion. The negative form thus becomes a divine promise to the redeemed servants of perfect ultimate triumph over the demonic power that would enslave them in the hell of endless alienation from God. An ethic rooted in such religion possesses the dynamic of faith, hope and love.

The laws of the Decalogue are formulated in terms appropriate to the covenantal order for which it was the treaty-constitution. For example, the specific form

of the sabbath law reflects the OT eschatological perspective and the promise appended to the fifth word (and elsewhere related to the entire law, cf. Dt. 5:33–6:3) employs the imagery of the contemporary, typical manifestation of God’s kingdom. This does not mean the Ten Commandments are not normative for covenant life today; but in determining their precise application we must always reckon with our eschatological location.

As for the division into ten words, the Decalogue’s parallelism with the suzerainty treaty structure shows the error of regarding the preamble and historical prologue as a commandment. Also, the variant forms of the prohibition of covetousness in Ex. 20:17 and Dt. 5:21 contradict the division of it into two commandments, and that obviates the associated error of combining into one what most Protestants, following the oldest tradition, have regarded as the first and second commandments. The customary division of the Decalogue into ‘two tables’ stems from failure to recognize the two tables as duplicate treaty texts.

Speculative higher criticism, though postulating an early (even Mosaic) Decalogue, regards the canonical form as the result of later expansive revisions. Such a reconstruction is incompatible with the form-critical identification of the treaty-nature of the Decalogue, for treaties were not subject to revisionary tampering.

Moreover, the treaty form called for by the covenantal context of Sinai would be lost in the shrunken hypothetical original. The theory that Ex. 34:11–26 is a primitive cultic ‘decalogue’ rests on a mistaken identification of this passage with the ‘ten words’ mentioned in Ex. 34:28. The actual relation of Ex. 34:5–27 to the second two Decalogue texts (Ex. 34:1–4, 28) is akin to that of Ex. 20:22–23:33 to the original tables.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3, 1940, pp. 271–465; G. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 1954, pp. 145–159; M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 1975.

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