

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_jbl-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php)

*The Ten Words.*

BY PROF. J. P. PETERS, PH.D.

As the Decalogue stands in the twentieth chapter of Exodus, it contains more than ten commandments. If we determine the commencement of the separate commandments by the repetition of the words of command in independent sentences, we have eleven commandments, beginning respectively with verses 3, 4, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17*a*, 17*b*. There being thus eleven commandments out of which ten must be formed, various combinations become possible, and, in fact, different churches have made different combinations of these eleven commandments, and hence do, at this day, use different Decalogues. Either verses 3-6 have been combined to form the first commandment, 17*a* and 17*b* being separated to form respectively the ninth and tenth commandments; or else the whole of verse 17 is formed into the tenth commandment, while at the other end verse 3 is separated from verses 4-6. The Massoretic division agrees essentially with the former arrangement, differing only in that it begins the Decalogue with verse 2 instead of verse 3. A third, or, rather, fourth, division is advocated by some scholars; namely, to treat verse 2 as the first commandment, verses 3-6 as the second, and verse 17 as the tenth.

Analyzing the Decalogue as it now stands, every one is confronted, furthermore, by the difficulty, or, rather, impossibility, of dividing it into two reasonably homogeneous tables of comparatively equal length. The latter commandments are very short; the former are, for the most part, long. What English-speaking Christians know as the second commandment, verses 3-6, consists of three parts. First comes the simple command, **לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל**. The second part is an amplification or exposition of this as applying to any representation of anything in the three spheres, and as forbidding the rendition of homage or service thereto. In the third place, the commandment is grounded with a "because"; namely, that Jehovah never fails to punish his adversaries and their offspring to the remotest generations, but plentifully rewards his faithful worshippers. The third commandment consists of two parts,—the command proper, and the ground or reason for its observance; which latter, as in the case of the second commandment, is a threat of punishment. The fourth commandment, like the second, consists of three parts. First,

the command proper (8) ; second, the amplification of the same, and its application in detail (9, 10) ; third, the ground or reason of the commandment, in the form of an historical argument from God's action in creation. The fifth commandment, like the third, is in two parts ; but here the second part contains a promise couched in the form of purpose. Then follow four brief commandments, containing neither specifications nor reasons, three of them consisting of but two words each. The tenth commandment is *sui generis* in that it is doubled. Beyond this it consists of two parts : the command proper, which, in this case, appears to be merely the two words **לֹא תַחַמְד**, and several specific applications of the same. It will be observed, that there is in the form of these commandments a considerable diversity, ranging from the terse and weighty brevity of the simple command with authority, to the comparative perplexity of the fourth commandment, where the command is followed by specifications of the mode and *personnel* of its observance, as well as by an argument to explain the origin and obligation of such observance.

In the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy we have another version of the Decalogue. Comparing this with the twentieth chapter of Deuteronomy, we find that the prefatory sentence **אֲנִי . . . עֲבָדִים** is the same in both, and that the commands proper are identical in all cases, excepting only the substitution in the fourth commandment of **שִׁמֹר** (Deut.) for **זָכֹר** (Ex.), and in the ninth of **שָׂא** (Deut.) for **שָׁקֵר** (Ex.), and that in Deuteronomy several of the commandments are connected by a ׀ of quotation. But when we compare in the two versions those parts of the commandments which consist of specifications and reasons for observance, we find in three out of the five more or less divergent forms in the two versions.<sup>1</sup>

In the second part of the fourth commandment, besides a phrase of historical reference inserted immediately after the command proper, the Deuteronomic version adds to the specifications of Exodus ; but the most important difference is found in the third division. The causal sentence of the version in Exodus is replaced in Deuteronomy by a sentence of purpose, after the manner of the fifth commandment, and an historical argument, based on the deliverance from Egypt, takes the place of that based on the story of creation.

The differences in the case of the fifth commandment are of the same nature as in the second part of the fourth commandment.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the second commandment, Deuteronomy inserts a ׀ in verse 9, but this I consider too slight a difference to be taken into account.

In the tenth commandment the words of command are the same in both versions; but, whereas, in Exodus the first application or specification was **בית רעך**, in Deuteronomy it is **אשת רעך**. In Exodus, the words of command, **לא תחמד**, were repeated; in Deuteronomy, they are replaced by the synonymous **ולא תתאוה**. There is, furthermore, one specification in Deuteronomy, **שרהו**, which does not occur in Exodus.<sup>1</sup>

Making every allowance for the fact of quotation and the purpose of exhortation as permitting and accounting for some variations, it seems impossible to believe that the writer of Deuteronomy, believing the fourth commandment to have been written by the finger of God, should have ventured to mutilate it by omitting the God-given reason for its existence, and substituting another of his own invention. Such a thing would seem like blasphemous presumption even for an inspired law-giver.

I have already practically outlined what seems to me the true solution of the differences in the two versions; namely, that the original Decalogue consisted of the ten simple commands or words, and that the specifications and arguments are to be regarded as additional matter not belonging to the original. The Ten Words would then read as follows:—

TABLE I.

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 1. | <b>לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני:</b>  |
|    | Thou shalt have none other god before Me.  |
| 2. | <b>לא תעשה לך פסל:</b>   |
|    | Thou shalt not make thee an image.   |
| 3. | <b>לא תשא את שם יהוה אלהיך לשוא:</b>   |
|    | Thou shalt not <sup>bear</sup> <sub>utter</sub> the name of Jehovah thy God falsely. |
| 4. | <b>זכור (שמור) את יום השבת לקדשו:</b>  |
|    | Remember the day of rest to sanctify it.   |
| 5. | <b>כבד את אביך ואת אמך:</b>  |
|    | Honor thy father and thy mother.   |

<sup>1</sup> The Deuteronomic version also omits 1 before שורו.

TABLE II.

- |     |  |                             |
|-----|--|-----------------------------|
| 6.  | Thou shalt not murder.                               | לא תרצח :                   |
| 7.  | Thou shalt not commit adultery.                      | לא תנאף :                   |
| 8.  | Thou shalt not steal.                                | לא תגנב :                   |
| 9.  | Thou shalt not testify falsely against thy neighbor. | לא תענה ברעך עד שקר (שוא) : |
| 10. | Thou shalt not covet.                                | לא תחמד :                   |

The variant reading in the fourth commandment seems to me due, in all probability, to a scribal error, the result of copying from memory rather than from inscription or manuscript. If the ninth commandment be accepted as original in its present form, then the variant reading here also is presumably to be explained in the same way. But there are two things which seem to me to militate against the acceptance of the present form as original. All the other commandments of the second table are alike in outward form, each consisting of the negative with a verb, and it seems as though we should expect this one likewise to consist of the two words, **לא תענה**. Again, it will be observed that the commandments of the second table form a descending scale, in which, as it stands at present, the ninth commandment seems to strike a note not in perfect harmony. The sixth commandment forbids injury to life, the seventh to honor, the eighth to property. The tenth, on the other hand, is more subtle, more refined; it enters into the heart of a man, and forbids him to harbor thoughts of envy or covetousness. Now, the ninth commandment seems, in comparison with the preceding, somewhat too limited in scope, and, in comparison of the succeeding, too external. But if we reduce the ninth commandment to a form similar to that of the other commandments of this table, will it give a sense better adapted to the context? If we had the form **לא תענה**, we should apparently be obliged to adopt another meaning for the verb, and translate "Thou shalt not humble," or "oppress," or "distress." We should

thus secure a more satisfactory gradation in the commandments of the second table ; but, on the other hand, we should raise new difficulties perhaps more serious than those we are endeavoring to remove. In adopting this form we should, in the first place, be obliged to suppose that the author of the limiting specification or comment had made an application of the word in a different root-sense from that intended in the original. In the second place, all authorities affirm that, with the root meaning "humble," the simple stem is always used with passive force, nor am I able to allege, with certainty, any instance to the contrary. In the intensive stem, it is true, the verb has the required meaning ; but as the verbs in all the other commandments of this table are used in the simple form, it is natural to expect the same here also.

My purpose has been to point out the distinction between the original Ten Words and the commentary attached to them. Without entering into a discussion of the authorship or antiquity of the latter, I may, in closing, remark, as bearing on these questions, that a comparison of the two versions of the Decalogue seems to show that some form of comment or *midrash* did, at an early date, begin to attach itself to the simple Ten Words in their popular use, and that such comment was at length welded upon the Ten Words ; that, at the time of the composition of Deuteronomy, while a considerable portion of such comment had already assumed definite form, nevertheless the process of production and growth had not yet ceased ; and that to the writer of Deuteronomy Ex. xx. 2-17 was not known as authoritative Scripture. With reference to Ex. xx. 2, Deut. v. 6, I am not prepared to argue either that the verse belongs to the original Ten Words, or that it is commentary. If the former be the case, I presume it is to be regarded rather as a preface to the whole, than as an integral part of the first commandment.