

Ancient Laws for New Challenges: The Ten Commandments as a Critique of Inequality

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This article argues that the Ten Commandments summoned ancient Israel to live as a community of mutual care where every person could flourish, especially the most vulnerable. Interpreting the Ten Commandments in their narrative context of oppression in Egypt and the exodus event and also in its relation to the law corpora of the Pentateuch clarifies that this text functions as a critique of Egypt's oppressive economic regime and thereby of any economic practice that privileges wealth and consolidated power. Giving allegiance to Yahweh must include living in the ethical trajectory of exodus, through which Yahweh has birthed the community.

Introduction

This article explores how the Ten Commandments, understood in their narrative, legal and theological context, can be a fresh and evocative resource for social justice and for missional communities today. Few Christians realise that the pressing problems of our generation – for example, massive inequality of wealth, growing refugee populations, and rampant consumerism – are issues that the Ten Commandments provide direction for, properly interpreted. The narrative context for this text (i.e., slavery in Egypt and the exodus event) as well as its relation to the law corpora of Exodus and Deuteronomy clarify the social dimensions of the text.

The text of the Ten Commandments appears twice in the Old Testament in its full form. In the narrative of the Old Testament, these laws were given from Mount Sinai less than three months after the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 10:1-17). One generation later, they reappear in Deuteronomy 5:1-21 in a very similar form within the second proclamation of the Mosaic law delivered in Moab on the edge of the Jordan River. In what follows, I will focus in particular on the ethical dimensions of this text by exploring the first, fourth, sixth, and eighth commandments. First, however, I will take a closer look at the narrative of Israel's slavery and emancipation.

Narrative setting

The narrative setting of the Ten Commandments is neglected in many studies of this text, and yet the connection between the exodus narrative and the Decalogue is crucial for interpretation. Yahweh spoke these words to the Israelites after rescuing them from slavery in Egypt across the Sea of Reeds. The Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai to receive these laws with the wounds on their back from the Egyptian whip still raw and open.

Consider what life had been like for the Israelites in Egypt before God delivered them. The Hebrews laboured in the brick factories of Pharaoh. Under the whip, they built store cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses (Exod. 1:11). Male babies were systematically destroyed to prevent any uprising, a policy that amounted to genocide (Exod. 1:15-22). Chilling also is Pharaoh's command that, in addition to making bricks, the Israelites must also gather the straw (Exod. 5:1-23). Pharaoh's insufferable command is a virtual death sentence. Human lives, Israelite lives at least, were expendable in Pharaoh's relentless pursuit of economic expansion. Economic productivity was God.

Yahweh strategically placed one Hebrew, Moses, in the courts of the empire. And from within the flames of a burning bush, Yahweh said to Moses: *I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. . . I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey* (Exod. 3:7-8).¹

The Hebrew word for 'cry', here, is a technical term for the cry of the oppressed. In response to their cry, Yahweh emancipated this enslaved people group, while also bringing judgment on Pharaoh for his oppressive rule.² Yahweh brought the Israelites to Mt. Sinai to receive the law. It is clearly evident that with these laws, Yahweh was creating a new community that operated according to how God wants all human communities to operate: a society where every person can thrive.

First commandment: *exclusive worship*

In light of the narrative setting, it is no surprise that the first commandment regarding exclusive worship also has ethical implications. Immediately preceding the first command is: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me* (Exod. 20:2-3; Deut. 5:4-5). This is pregnant with theology: Yahweh the Great King has enacted a slave emancipation of massive proportions. With this act, Pharaoh along with his regime has been judged and left behind.³ Israel has been 'brought out' of slavery in Egypt so that she may be 'brought into' the Promised Land, and 'brought into' a new shared life of flourishing for all, especially the most vulnerable (Deut. 6:21-25).⁴ The exodus is all about creating a new community, under a new King (Deut. 6:24-25). Giving allegiance to this God will include following in the ethical trajectory of exodus, through which Yahweh has birthed the community.

Fourth commandment: *Sabbath rest*

In Egypt, there was no weekly day of rest for the Israelites. It is clear from the narrative that the brick factories of Pharaoh did not stop for weekends (Exod. 5:1-23). But Yahweh proclaimed: *Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male slave or your female slave, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the stranger who is within your gates, that your male slave and your female slave may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm* (Deut. 5:12-15).

A weekly day of rest is proclaimed for a nation of slaves. What relief the Israelites must have felt when they heard these words. If a person is to thrive, life must consist of more than work. People need space for rest, for worship, and for relationships. From this day in ancient Israel, no one, especially vulnerable people, and even the animals, are to be deprived of this rhythm of work and rest.

The primary function of the Sabbath command in the Exodus Decalogue and the Deuteronomic Decalogue is to protect the most vulnerable from exploitative labour. This is made clear from the list of participants: *your male slave or your female slave, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the stranger who is within your gates* (Deut. 5:14a). This is also clarified by the repetition, *that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you* (Deut. 5:14b) and also from the exodus motivation clause (Deut. 5:15).

By stipulating a weekly day of rest, the Sabbath command very directly intervenes in harsh labour practices. It is also a theological affirmation that the most vulnerable, too, share in the divine gifts of the land and its produce and are invited into the 'rest' that is the result of Yahweh's supply (e.g., Deut. 26:1-2, 11). The projected result is that the most vulnerable people are dignified as full participants in the community. To extrapolate, the Sabbath command injects a life-giving pause in the endless cycle of production. Egypt had a policy of production at any cost, so to speak. In Israel, however, the flourishing of all human beings is a priority (cf. Deut. 15:4).

In the Pentateuch, the provision of Sabbath rest also applies to the creation itself. A stipulation that is thought by many scholars to be a very ancient makes this association:⁵ *For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard and with your olive orchard* (Exod. 23:10-11, ESV). This command asserts that God's ancient people must work in such a way that earth, too, is allowed to rest (Exod. 23:10).

What does the Sabbath mean for Christ followers and for society today? It teaches us that we must not live in such a way that other people don't rest. It also prompts us to explore creative ways to foster for vulnerable people their full participation in society. Here is a practical example of how a worshipping community may be innovative according to the trajectory of the Sabbath command. The church where I pastor has developed an agency called Just Work that seeks to give dignifying work to people who are not able to secure permanent employment because of disability or some other misfortune. Just Work offers supported employment in renovation, in catering, and in pottery—a pottery studio is located in the basement of our church building. Through this dignifying work, our friends enter into the Sabbath rhythm of work and rest. Just Work shifts the goalposts of economic production. There is a *double bottom-line*, both to produce revenue and also to create dignifying work. The Sabbath command injects a life-giving pause in the endless cycle of production demanding that the earth itself can rest.

Sixth commandment: *You shall not murder*

The sixth commandment states, 'You shall not murder'. This stipulation today tends to be applied individualistically: murder is a crime. It is applied to whole societies in relation to capital punishment, war, and abortion. These implications of the sixth commandment are important, though also very complex.

However, the rest of the Old Testament makes it clear that the command 'You shall not murder' was spoken mostly to restrain the excesses of powerful people, like Pharaoh (see, e.g., Deut. 24:6; Is. 58-59). For the background for this law is slavery in Egypt. What beautiful words these are for nation of bereaved families (Exod. 1:15-22) and endangered brick workers. Human life is given intrinsic, not instrumental, value. In Egypt, economic productivity was valued above human life—the foreman's life was threatened for the sake of brick quotas. Unlike Egypt, Israel is not to be an economy of production at any cost but an economy of neighbourly well-being.

Israel's law is radical here. In too many societies economic productivity is subtly valued more highly than human life (see Deut. 24:6). In England two hundred years ago, a person was hanged if

they stole a sheep. The sixth commandment should prompt us to consider the ways in which our culture might be tolerating a similar value reversal. One sphere where this may be the case is international trade: the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and other western nations collect a far higher percentage tariff on goods imported from poorer nations than from other western nations. The United Nations estimates that poor countries lose around US\$2 billion per day because of unjust trade rules.

Eighth commandment: *You shall not steal*

The eighth commandment stipulates, 'You shall not steal'. For most of my life, this command brought to my mind an image of a thief in a black mask creeping around a house a night—I was imagining someone who was poor stealing from someone who was rich. To be sure, the eighth commandment forbids any kind of theft. However, the command 'You shall not steal' was given primarily to restrain the rich. This is evident, first, in the narrative context of slavery in Egypt: the thrust of this command is that there are to be no 'Pharaohs' in Israel; no one household is to accumulate excessively at the expense of another.

Second, this is evident in that a primary focus of the law corpora of the Pentateuch was to restrain the excess and violence of wealthy and powerful people (e.g., Exod. 22:21-27; Deut. 15:1-15; Deut. 24:6-22; Lev. 19:9-16). Consider, for example, the biblical laws surrounding land possession. Land law was the main protection against poverty in Israel. Every Israelite family was to own land that was suitable for agriculture and for grazing. Land ownership could not be revoked by anyone: '*The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine . . .*' (Lev. 25:23). God owns the land, and he has given everybody a piece of it. We need to grasp what a remarkable economic arrangement this is. Wealth-producing capital is in the hands of *every* Israelite—not in the hands of a privileged few.

The thrust of the eighth commandment is that no one family is permitted to accumulate excessively. The goal is that no Israelite family will permanently fall into poverty. We should celebrate the fact that God has given us enough not only to live but also to share.

The eighth commandment contains an invitation to worshipping communities today: to be communities that are genuinely committed to living simply. In my own experience, it is almost impossible not to be influenced by the wealth and the lifestyle of our neighbours. It is extremely challenging for an individual person or an individual family to say 'no' to the pressures of consumerism. But together as a community of God's people indwelt by the Spirit and encouraging each other, there are real possibilities. For example, in our worshipping community in Vancouver, Canada, many people deliberately choose to work part-time so that they can be more engaged in our community and also in ministering within our neighbourhood.

Conclusion

The Ten Commandments are an ancient and poignant expression of God's will for all human societies. They are also a sharp and unambiguous expression of this will, delivered in highly innovative literary and legal form. Two powerful characters, standing in opposition, have left their mark on the Ten Commandments: Yahweh the God of Israel and Pharaoh the king of Egypt (who thought that he was a god). All ten of the Commandments stand as a rebuke to Pharaoh and his regime.

Accordingly, two models for society stand in direct opposition to each other. One is a society of profit at any cost—the way of Pharaoh. The other is a society of mutual care that lives as family—the way of Yahweh. This diagram represents these two rulers and these two societies.

Two Models for Society

<p>Judged and left behind Organiser: Pharaoh</p> <p>Model for society: Accumulation and consolidated power</p>
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<p>A brand-new day Organiser: Yahweh</p> <p>Model for society: mutuality and care</p>

Pharaoh's model for a society that is characterised by accumulation and consolidated power is judged and left behind in the exodus event. God's good rule opens the potential for a brand-new day for human relationships, where humanity lives as family.

For further reading

- Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* 2nd ed. (Fortress, 2002).
- David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (Faber and Faber, 1963).
- Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2004).

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¹ Translations are the author's unless otherwise stated.

² See further, David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

³ See Daube, *Exodus Pattern*.

⁴ 'Deuteronomy and Human Rights', in *Theology of Deuteronomy: Collected Essays of Georg Braulik, O.S.B.* trans. U. Lindblad. N. (Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 1994), 131-50, at 135; trans. of 'Das Deuteronomium und die Menschenrechte', *TQ* 166 (1986), 8-24.

⁵ See further, Eckart Otto, 'Aspects of Legal Reforms and Reformulations in Ancient Cuneiform and Israelite Law', in *Theory and Method in Biblical and Cuneiform Law: Revision, Interpolation and Development*, ed. Bernard M. Levinson. *JOT Supp.* 181 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 160-96, at 186-89.