

# The Ten Commandments

The second major doctrine of five affirmed by the Review and Herald in 1854 was "The Law of God [[Yahuwah](#)], as taught in the Old and New Testaments, unchangeable." While we might imagine that other moral, social, and health related laws are also intended, as they appear in the Bible, the most outstandingly visible of God's laws that are taught in the Old and New Testaments, are **the Ten Commandments**. They are stated to be *unchangeable*.

It is the purpose of this article to identify what the ten commandments are, give a brief view of their historical importance, to show that they are taught in the Old and New Testaments, and finally to show that they are unchangeable.

## What Are the Ten Commandments?

The text that we know as the ten commandments is found in Exodus 20:1-17, but they are not called the Ten Commandments there. The expression Ten Commandments is only used three times in the Bible. (Exo 34:28) And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. (Deu 4:13) And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, *even* ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone. (Deu 10:4) And he wrote on the tables, according to the first writing, the ten commandments, which the LORD spake unto you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly: and the LORD gave them unto me.



From these texts in Deuteronomy, we can see that the Ten Commandments are the words found in Exodus 20, and not, as some would have it, those found in Exodus 34 itself. They are not the words referring to sacrifices, annual feasts, and the practice of boiling a kid in its mother's milk. They are the words declared publicly "out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly," that is, the commandments of Exodus 20.

## What Has Been the Role of the Ten Commandments in History?

It is amazing that the ten commandments have received so much attention in recent years, and yet the very people who have raised the issue do not take what the commandments say seriously. The ten commandments, as recorded in Exodus 20, maintain the absolute oneness of God. Most of those who wish to have the commandments displayed on public buildings by contrast believe in the Trinity, a doctrine completely foreign to the ten commandments and its associated traditions. Furthermore, about a third of the text of the ten commandments relates to the seventh-day Sabbath. Most of those who support the greater visibility of the commandments are Sunday observers. Finally, one of the ten commandments is Thou shalt not kill. Both the death penalty and pre-emptive war of aggression seem to be popular issues among some of the same people who glibly favor the Decalogue.



It is only reasonable, however, that this inconsistency should be so. The ten commandments are pervasively used by nearly all Christian churches, to say nothing of Jews. Even Islam recognizes them to have been given to Moses as the criterion of right and wrong. Obviously, most of these religious establishments, despite their lip service to the ten commandments, do not observe them. In fact, all of the faith traditions of the world maintain at least half of the commandments. Yet no faith tradition maintains all ten in a literal way. The ten commandments appear in nearly every Christian catechism ever written, but some of them are explained contrary to the clear and obvious sense of the text. For Martin Luther in the Shorter Catechism the Sabbath commandment means to go to church and abide by what the preacher says! The very commandment that establishes the authority of God is being usurped to bolster the authority of man. Even the Roman Catholic Church gives the ten commandments, in abridged and changed form, a place in its catechism.

The ten commandments are unique in that in all of the classical religious literature of the world it appears that there is no other text that claims to have been revealed directly by God to an enormous crowd of people. All other texts come through an individual, often by means of visions, dreams, or individual intuitions. Angels and prophets are prominent, but rarely direct speech of God.



Exodus 20 reports that God spoke directly and publicly on Mount Sinai soon after Israel left Egypt. There are hints and references to such a divine revelation around the world in the oral traditions of the most far-flung people. Tribes in Africa, North and South America, and other parts of the world have preserved the story of God giving a message to humankind on a mountain. Sometimes the details of such stories are strikingly similar to the Bible. The story as told among American Indians included the destruction of pursuing enemies by being buried and smothered, the miraculous springs of water, the covenant, the thunder on the mountain, the speaking of the Creator from the mountain, and the giving of a stone memento of the event.

While the text of the ten commandments may not appear in other sacred books, most of them refer directly to most of the commandments. No religion supports killing, stealing, adultery, or dishonoring parents. Their sacred books refer to these principles in terms that are very much like the ten commandments. Each of the commandments is referenced in the Qur'an, including the Sabbath in several passages. Most religious traditions are like Christianity in having the principles of the ten commandments in their sacred books, but fail to maintain some of them. The Qur'an terms Sabbath-breakers monkeys, but that does not prevent Muslims generally from ignoring the Sabbath, just like their fellow believers the Christians. On the other hand, in ancient times it appears that the principles of the ten commandments were incredibly well-known and followed. The observance of the Sabbath by non-Jewish populations was widespread.

The importance of the ten commandments in ancient Jewish tradition is inestimable. Some people valued them so highly, that they considered nothing else of importance. At a time when books were rare and costly, the temptation to consider that revelation consisted of the ten commandments only was great. The Rabbis eventually irradiated the idea from Judaism, but at a heavy cost. Only after prohibiting the recitation of the ten commandments as part of the daily prayers were they able to educate the Jewish populace to see the other duties of the Torah as of equal value. The history is mentioned in some detail in Jewish Liturgy and its Development, A. Z. Idelsohn, pages 91, 92.

"In the Temple Service the Ten Commandments were read before the Shema. This custom, however, was not adopted outside the Temple, on account of the Sectaries who said that only these commandments were divinely revealed

(b.Ber.12a). In the Nash-Papyrus of about the first century C.E. found in Egypt, the Ten Commandments are given before the Shema.

"The Ten Commandments continued to be recited in the Palestinian synagogue in Egypt until the thirteenth century.

"A clearer reason is given in Jer. Ber. 1, 3c, – the reason being that 'they (the Minim) shall not say that only these (the Ten Commandments) were given to Moses on Mount Sinai.' Kohler adds: 'Only because the early Judeo-Christians claimed divine revelation exclusively for the Ten Commandments, discarding the other Mosaic laws as temporary enactments, was the recital of the Decalogue in the daily morning liturgy afterwards abolished.'"

There is a great deal stated and implied here, but perhaps the most relevant to this article is the fact that the ten commandments were once far more central to both Judaism and Christianity than they are today. The only conclusion to be drawn is a general and pervasive apostasy. A few people still maintain that early "Judeo-Christian" belief, that the Ten Commandments form the central and determining divine revelation for all time and everywhere.

Those who are coming out of Babylon and forming home churches to worship in purity would do well to consider that the ten commandments should be recited in every meeting for worship.

## What Does the Bible Say About the Ten Commandments?



We have already seen three texts defining the ten commandments as those words spoken publicly "out of the midst of the fire" by God before millions of people, and written with God's own finger. That is reaffirmed by more texts as well.

(Exo 24:12) And the LORD said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them. (Exo 31:18) And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an

end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God. (Exo 32:15) And Moses turned, and went down from the mount, and the two tables of the testimony were in his hand: the tables were written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other were they written.

It is of interest that the commandments were written on all sides of the stones. We do not know how large or in what shape the stones were, but if they compared to the ancient clay tablets found in a number of places in the Middle East and to ancient covenant stones found among the Hittites, they were more elongated than cubic, and had six sides upon which writing appeared. Covenants were sometimes anciently put in two identical texts on each of two stones, as copies of the treaty for both parties. But in this case it was not so according to both Jewish and Christian tradition, which divides the commandments between the two stones. This is affirmed by Ellen White as well. "The fifth commandment is sacred; but if you should transgress any of the first four precepts of the decalogue, wherein is revealed the duty of man to his Creator, you would not be in a favorable position for the sacred observance of the last six commandments which specify the duties of man to his fellow man. To break any one of the commandments which specify the duty of man to God is to violate the principles of the entire law. The pen of inspiration records that he who offends in one point is guilty of offense in all. Thus, should the Sabbath of the fourth commandment be disregarded, and man prove recreant to the claims of God upon him, will this disobedience prepare him to fulfill the requirements of the law which specifies his duty to his earthly parents? Will his heart be fitted through transgression of a plain precept of Jehovah upon the first table of stone, to keep the first precept on the second table. We are required, by this commandment, to honor our parents, and

we are unnatural children if we do not obey this precept. But if love and reverence are due our earthly parents how much more is reverence and love due our heavenly Parent.” {ST, February 28, 1878 par. 5}

What is important is the fact that God Himself wrote the message on the tables of stone and gave them to Moses to keep as the words of the covenant for the people. (Exo 32:16) And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables.

Everyone knows the fate of the first set of commandments and how it was necessary to make a new set. The theory that the second set of tables contained a different set of commandments cannot be held, as it conflicts with the story in the Bible. (Exo 32:19) And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. (Exo 34:1) And the LORD said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest. (Exo 34:4) And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone. (Exo 34:28)



(Exo 34:29) And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him.

The ten commandments as proclaimed and written by God are affirmed in Moses' summary sermon to the Israelites before their entrance into the Promised Land. (Deu 5:22) These words the LORD spake unto all your assembly in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice: and he added no more. And he wrote them in two tables of stone, and delivered them unto me.

The story of the breaking and renewal of the stones is repeated in Deuteronomy nine and ten. The placing of the commandments in the ark is described there in detail. (Deu 10:1) At that time the LORD said unto me, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first, and come up unto me into the mount, and make thee an ark of wood. (Deu 10:2) And I will write on the tables the words that were in the first tables which thou brakest, and thou shalt put them in the ark. (Deu 10:3) And I made an ark of shittim wood, and hewed two tables of stone like unto the first, and went up into the mount, having the two tables in mine hand. (Deu 10:4) And he wrote on the tables, according to the first writing, the ten commandments, which the LORD spake unto you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly: and the LORD gave them unto me. (Deu 10:5) And I turned myself and came down from the mount, and put the tables in the ark which I had made; and there they be, as the LORD commanded me.

The table of the commandments remained in the ark for many generations. (1Ki 8:9) There was nothing in the ark save the two tables of stone, which Moses put there at Horeb, when the LORD made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. (Also 2 Chronicles 5:10).

The New Testament does not use the expression "ten commandments." But it mentions **the law of God**, the tables of stone, the covenant, and each of the commandments individually many times. The first occurrence of the expression "tables of stone" occurs in (2Co 3:3) Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

This is a reference to the **New Covenant** prophesied by Jeremiah. (Jer 31:31) Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: (Jer 31:32) Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: (Jer 31:33) But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer 31:34) And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Much is made of the New Covenant by those who wish to say that the ten commandments, by which they mean the seventh-day Sabbath, is no longer binding. But what does the text say? It says that God will put His law in their inward parts, and write it on their hearts. It does not say that God will give a new law, one different from the one He gave on Sinai. The one He gave on Sinai failed only because the people did not keep it, not because there was something wrong with the commandments. The same God who wrote with His own finger on the tables of stone promises to write the same law with His own finger on our hearts. The ten commandments written on the heart instead of on tables of stone is the New Covenant.

The New Testament does not say a great deal about the tables of stone as a whole. But what it does say is clear and important. The first and most important thing is that the ten commandments, under the New Covenant are to be written on the heart. There is only one more mention of the tables of stone, and that is (Heb 9:4) Which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant.



The tables of the law were placed in the ark in the tabernacle. There they stayed as a reminder of the covenant between God and Israel. But that was not the original law. Many think that the ten commandments were given at Sinai to the Jews alone. First of all, that cannot be true, because the Jews are only one tribe of the twelve who stood at Mount Sinai. Secondly, there was a great mixed multitude of people also there. They had come from the most cosmopolitan center of the world in that day, from Egypt. They represented all of the people on earth, every tribe and language and people. But even so, the tables in stone at Sinai were not the original. The original expression of the ten commandments is in heaven itself, where it remains eternally the law of God. And that is why the New

Testament gives us a glimpse of the ten commandments in a glimpse of heaven. (Rev 11:19) And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.

The ten commandments are hidden in the ark of the testimony in heaven itself. As we allow the law of God to be written on our hearts, we too become the temple of God, a reflection of the glory of heaven. The ten commandments are unchangeable in heaven. God can and will make them unchangeable in the temple of the human heart.