The Decalogue

SENAN BUCKLEY, O.C.D.

'The apparent eclipse of God is merely a sign that the world is experiencing what the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner calls "the anonymous presence" of God whose word comes to man not in tablets of stone but in the inner murmurings of the heart.' I quote from *Time* magazine, from that provocative (if perhaps somewhat sketchy) article, entitled 'Is God dead?' (issue of 8th April, 1966). It might seem therefore that the time is gone for reading papers at Biblical Society meetings on the Decalogue, since that is bound to revive thinking on the 'tablets of stone', which have given way to the 'murmurings of the heart'. And yet, I think, it is not possible to prescind from the tablets of stone, and at least one justification for speaking about them still is that they may have led in no small way to our finding God in the inner murmurings of the heart.

Interest in the Decalogue is perennial. There is constant assessment of its relevance; its ethical content; Christ's attitude towards it; references to it in the gospels; the use of it in early church catechesis, its place in modern catechesis, and so on. I shall limit myself here to some basic scriptural questions, and deal chiefly with the Biblical text and context, the problems involved in enumeration, the Decalogue's origin and meaning. Thus: I, The Text; II, Enumeration of Commandments; III, Origin of Text; IV, Meaning of Some Precepts.

I. The Text

There are a number of references, direct or indirect, in the Bible to the Decalogue. Setting aside these for the moment, and prescinding also from the so-called cultic or ritual Decalogue (Exod. 34:10–26), let us concentrate on the two places in the Bible where the full text of the moral Decalogue is given (Exod. 20:2–17 and Deut. 5:6–21). For these are in fact our only sources.[1]

[1] The Nash papyrus, that wonderful discovery in the beginning of the century until it was dwarfed by the flood of MSS. from Qumran, is a conflation of the two with a few deviations of its own. Qumran, though it has enlightened us on many things, adds nothing new here.

In Exodus.—It is generally accepted that the Exodus text is older in content though later in literary fixation. Concerning the context in which the Decalogue is found in Exodus, it is of importance, I think, to bear in mind the whole enveloping context, from ch. 19 to 34. By ch. 19, the Israelites under Moses, liberated from Egypt, have reached Sinai. God awaits them there, according to the picturesque Biblical account, to conclude an alliance with them, to make them his people. In an astounding theophany described in vivid detail by the sacred author, God imparts the accompaniments of that alliance: the Decalogue (20:2–17); followed by a more extended collection of laws, the (Elohist) Code of Alliance, 20:22–23:19. The pact is concluded by a sacrifice, ch. 24. The alliance which is to make Israel 'a kingdom of priests and a consecrated nation' (19:6) is completed by a series of ordinances concerning worship and the desert sanctuary, ch. 25-31. But the people, wishing for a more accessible God than the one who was speaking to Moses in the cloud over Sinai, made for themselves a calf of gold. Moses, coming down from the mount, condemned their apostasy (breaking the tables of stone in the process) and obtained God's pardon, ch. 32-33. God renewed the alliance, reiterated the Commandments: which, however, turn out to be the (Jahvist) Code of Alliance, or ritual Decalogue, 34:14–26. That is the whole context of Exodus in which the Decalogue is set. It is a solemn context which eminently suits it. From the literary point of view, however, some difficulties present themselves. That some patching or soldering has been done is obvious from the ruggedness of the text. In the case of the renewal of the tables of the law in Exod. 34 we are suddenly presented with another collection of laws, usually termed the 'cultic Decalogue', which many authors regard as just a Jahvistic replica of the ethical (and Elohist) Decalogue of Exod. 20. Further, by grouping certain laws which are found at the beginning and the end of the Code of Alliance, one might easily reconstruct a third Decalogue, half ethical, half cultic. Finally, one might construct an outline or sketch of other Decalogues by detaching from the Code of Alliance and the Holiness Code certain categorical or even apodictic commandments. Indeed, one is sometimes inclined to ask if the Decalogue may not in the last resort be the result of the synthesis of prohibitions already existing in contexts primitively distinct: commandments 1–3 together; then 4–9; finally 10, when the synthesis was accomplished?

It is not easy at all, as we know, to distinguish the three sources (or traditions)—Jahvist, Elohist and Priestly—in Exodus. The main lines, however, are clear enough. J. is the predominant tradition; the other two, in their narrative sections, relate the same great events, in parallel or complimentary manner, except in rare cases. Regarding the section we are considering (19–34): the Decalogue (20:1–17) and the Code of Alliance (20:22–23:19), and ch. 24 are Elohist in origin; ch. 25–31 of course

are P. (30-31 may be an addition); ch. 32 is E., probably with an admixture of J., 34:10–27 are clearly J.[2]

In Deuteronomy.—The context of Deuteronomy, in which the Decalogue is set, requires very little description. It is inserted in the second introductory discourse (ch. 5-11), which is just another exhortation to keep the law. The Decalogue (5:6–21) is followed by a description of the covenant scene of Sinai-Horeb, an exhortation to love Jahweh, to keep the law, to avoid contact with the Canaanites, to have confidence in the power of Jahweh to give them the land of Canaan, etc. The next big section in the book is the Deuteronomic Code (ch. 12–26).[3]

Comparing Exodus and Deuteronomy.—The two texts of the Decalogue (Exod. and Deut.) are not identical, and while some of the textual differences are merely verbal, others are of a more fundamental nature, and call for notice and comment. Examples of merely verbal divergencies are: (1) Exod. 20:8: *Remember* the Sabbath day to sanctify it; Deut. 5:12: *Observe* (keep) the Sabbath day to sanctify it; (2) Exod. 20:10: You shall do no work . . . nor your *beasts* . . .; Deut. 5:14: You shall do no work . . . nor *your ox nor your ass* nor any of your beasts . . .; (3) (Exod. 20:16: Do not testify against your neighbour as a *false* witness; Deut. 5:20: . . . against your neighbour as a witness of *vanity* (dishonesty). These discrepancies are merely verbal, of little importance really, and variants in the Hebrew text (and translations) tend to nullify or obliterate them.

The more fundamental differences are:

1. The Deuteronomy text contains some phrases, usually indicating a certain motivation, which are missing in Exodus. Example: Deut. 5:16: Honour your father and mother, *as Jahweh your God has commanded you.* We may note that this type of phrase, as motive, is found frequently in Deuteronomy (*see* 20:17 for example); and the continuation of this motivation phrase: 'so that you may live long and be prosperous in the land which Jahweh your God is giving you' is also typical of Deuteronomy.[4]

2. A very notable variation is that concerning the Sabbath motivation. In Exod. 20:11, the motivation adduced is the example of God, who completed the work of creation in six days and rested on the seventh, thus sanctifying it. The allusion is manifestly to the Priestly account of Creation (Gen. 1:1-2, 4a), and might indicate here a late recension (post-exilic priestly code?). In Deut. 5:14, on the other hand, the motive for the Sabbath rest is distinctly connected with the Exodus, and is

---

[2] Cf. *La Sainte Bible* (ed. du Cerf, Paris, 2nd ed., revue, 1958), *L'Exode* (*par* B. Couroyer, O.P.), Introduction.

[3] Cf. *La Sainte Bible: Le Deuteronome* (*par* H. Cazelles, P.S.S.), Introduction.

[4] Cf. 4:40; 6:2; 11:9, 21; 12:28; 22:7.

humanitarian and philanthropic: the citizen of Israel, remembering that he was once a slave in Egypt (from which God brought him, with a strong hand and outstretched arm) should allow his servants to rest from work as well as himself. The dictates therefore are those of gratitude and humanity. Again, this is quite in accord with the humanitarian spirit of the legislator in Deuteronomy, who is concerned, and even moved to compassion, by the plight of the weak and the defenceless: for example, 16:11–22 and 24:17-22 (strangers, fatherless, widows, etc.), and could descend even to legislate concerning the little bird with young (22:6-7). Joined to this motivation in Deuteronomy is the recall of the Exodus and of the wonderful act of Jahweh in bringing it about.

3. The variation between Exod. 20:17 and Deut. 5:21 is, from the theological point of view, perhaps the most interesting and intriguing. In Exodus, 'do not covet your neighbour's house', etc., the house (in the well-known sense of family and property) is mentioned first, and the wife (mentioned second) is included in the 'house' together with servants, ox, ass, etc. This, in fact, was the common Hebrew conception and view of things: 'house' covering in a comprehensive manner the wife, children, servants, etc.[5] And only one word—*ḥāmad*—is used (twice) for 'covet'. In Deuteronomy, however, the wife is mentioned first, and seemingly apart, and 'house' seems to take on the meaning of 'dwelling' only. As if to give point to the mention of the wife apart, one verb is used to refer to coveting her (*ḥāmad*: the same as is used for *all* the objects in Exodus), and another verb *hithaweh* (hithpael of *awah*) is used of coveting all the rest.

Deuteronomy Text a Development.—This is a very notable textual variation; in fact it seems to be not merely a variation but an interpretation. And it invites speculation. Here we are in the presence, I think, of a development in Hebrew thought. We are aware that in Old Testament times there was a rather constant process of re-reading of laws, a kind of bringing up to date, or *aggiornamento*. What we take for granted in the case of other laws, we do not often suspect in relation to the Decalogue. The latter was always fundamental, we know, as part of the Sinai covenant; and it always remained an inspiration, but not an immutable monument. And in this instance, in Deuteronomy, we have an example of a modification, a development, in view of changing social conditions. It seems that already, in Old Testament times, the Deuteronomist was conscious that a man's wife was not on the same plane as the other possessions' (slaves, ox, ass, house); she merited mention apart from them. And so the text of Exodus, the older recension, was allowed to stand; Deuteronomy, however, placed the wife first, and then grouped together the rest of man's

[5] *See* Gen. 7:1; 12:17; Josh. 2:12.

possessions, emphasizing the distinction by using a separate verb in this case. It is interesting to note, in this respect, that in the LXX text, Exod. 20:17 was made to conform to Deut. 5:21: though in the minor matter of the verbs it does not distinguish: *ouk epithumeseis* twice in each case.

This leads to a further problem. Because of the distinction made in Deuteronomy between a man's wife and his other possessions, so to speak, a further distinction came to be made in Christian times in relation to the same text: it came to be seen as two distinct commandments. Here we encounter the question of the *enumeration* of the Ten Commandments.

II. Enumeration of Commandments

The very name 'Decalogue' signifies that they are ten. *Hoi deka logoi* (or *ta deka rhemata*) is the common LXX translation for the Hebrew *aśeret haddĕbharim*, the ten 'words' (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13, 10:4)—they are never referred to as 'commandments' in the Bible. It was the word '*decalogoi*' which prevailed in the literature of the church, from the second century, in the works of Irenaeus. It is strange, however, that, though they are called ten words, and the fact that they are ten is firmly established, based as it is both on the Bible and on universally accepted tradition, it is not at all clear from the Bible how the ten are to be enumerated, and distinguished from one another. On Bible data and evidence alone, we might number them in three different ways, and various ecclesiastical traditions do just that.

(A) We have a classification, which may perhaps be traced back to Clement of Alexandria (Strom. 6, 16; P.G. 9, 361),[6] found its chief exponent in St. Augustine (Quaest. LXXI in Exod. PL 34, 620) and through his influence was adopted by all the later fathers of the Latin Church (Jerome excepted). It is accepted today by the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran churches. Augustine, following the text of Deuteronomy, distinguished two commandments in Deut. 5:21, and stated them as follows: 'Do not covet your neighbour's wife', 'Do not covet your neighbour's possessions (or goods)'; and, for Augustine, they form the last *two* commandments of the Decalogue. This is usually called the Augustinian classification.

---

[6] Clement's enumeration of the commandments here is neither complete nor clear. While for the first three commandments he seems to give the enumeration followed by Augustine later, in specifying the other seven, he writes in an ambiguous manner. But it would seem that, for him, respect for parents is No. 5 (not 4), and No. 10 embraces all covetousness. A slight emendation of Clement's text would put him in agreement with the classification of Philo, whom in fact he usually follows in matters relating to the Old Law.

(B) A second classification, witnessed by Philo (De Decal. 65, 106), Josephus (Ant. 3, 5, 5), followed by the Greek Fathers,[7] and accepted by almost all Protestant churches, except the Lutheran. This leaves Exod. 20:17 intact to form one commandment, the 10th, and distinguishes two commandments at the beginning where the Augustinian system sees only one.

(C) Thirdly, there is a classification adopted by the Jews, at least from the fourth to fifth century A.D. Admittedly, this differs only slightly from the second, but I think it is worth while recording it.[8]

In order to see at a glance the various classifications, and what exactly is involved in the various enumerations, we might indicate it schematically as follows (taking the Exodus text ch. 20 as basis):

Commandment No.	Classification A (Aug. Latin Frs. R.C. and Lutheran)	Classification B (Greek Frs. Prot.)	Classification C (Jews)
	v.	v.	v.
I	2–6	2–3	2
II	7	4–6	3–6
III	8–11	7	7
IV	12	8–11	8–11
V	13	12	12
VI	14	13	13
VII	15	14	14
VIII	16	15	15
IX	17a	16	16
X	17b	17	17

From the above table, we see at a glance that in all three classifications vv. 7, 8–11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 each represents a separate commandment; in A they represent commandments II to VIII inclusive, in B and C they are III–IX inclusive. The

[7] The reasons given by these fathers for the classification are various, and not always very convincing. For example, Origen speaks of 'You shall have no gods besides me' and 'You shall not make yourself a graven image' as two separate commandments. The main reason seems to be that otherwise it is not possible to get Ten Commandments out of the whole text (of Exod. and Deut.). 'Some (he says) are of the opinion that the two together constitute only one commandment. But in that case how could we find *Ten* Commandments? And where would be the truth of the Decalogue?' (In Exod. homil 8, PG. 12, 351).

[8] Jerome follows at times the enumeration of Philo and the Greek Fathers, (e.g. in Ephesios 5, PL 26, 537). On occasion, however, he accepts the Jewish enumeration, as when he says that Exod. 20, vv. 2 and 3 constitute two commandments (in Osee 10, PL 25, 908).

difference arises when it comes to enumerating the three remaining commandments. We have only the following verses of the sacred text to dispose of: vv. 2–6 and v. 17. Are we to find two commandments in vv. 2–6 and one in v. 17; or are we to find one commandment in vv. 2–6 and two in v. 17? The tradition of the Western Church Fathers since Augustine is to consider vv. 2–6 as constituting one commandment, then two commandments are excavated from v. 17 by dividing it into two (separating a man's wife from his other 'possessions'). In the other two classifications (B and C), v. 17 is kept intact to form only one commandment; then two commandments are got by dividing vv. 2–6: either like this, vv. 2-3 and vv. 4–6 (classification B) or like this, v. 2 and vv. 3–6 (classification C).

It is quite difficult to decide which is the best over-all enumeration: each has much to say for itself, and none is without its drawbacks, it would seem. On the credit side for A is the fact that it recognizes what seems to be a development, as we have seen, even in Hebrew thought concerning Exod. 20:17; it is also very much in tune with the Christian idea of the dignity of woman. On the other hand, it may be argued that vv. 2–6 contain more than one commandment.[9] For B stands the fact that it recognizes a distinction between the commandment: 'You shall have no other gods besides me' (vv. 2-3) and 'You shall not make any graven image . . .' (vv. 4–6). Exegetically speaking, this is a good classification, even though it ignores any development, amounting to a division, in v. 17. The Jewish classification C is singular in regarding v. 2: 'I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt', as a separate commandment. This is a mere statement, quite different from all the rest which so clearly command, or mostly prohibit, something. And yet this is an important preamble, a self-introduction (*Selbstvorstellung*) so to speak, by which v. 2 is distinguished from all that follows. And in a manner it may be said that this verse is the chief commandment, one that contains them all; and so, perhaps, it would appear to the Jewish mind.

III. Origin of Text

It is generally agreed that neither the recension of Exodus nor that of Deuteronomy shows the Decalogue in its original form. Most interpreters believe that all the commandments in

[9]Though it is interesting to note that the first part of the Decalogue contains three 'motivations', each introduced by *Kī* (vv. 5*b*, 7 and 11). This might lead one to think that each of the three forms the conclusion of a separate precept, in which case the first three precepts would be vv. 2–6, 7 and 8–11, which is in fact Augustine's way of enumerating them. J. J. Stamm, in *Le Decalogue à la Lumière des Recherches contemporaines* (Neuchatel, 1959) (two lectures in Berne, 1957, result of studies since 1929), approves as correct the traditional association of the first two commandments by Roman Catholics and Lutherans.

their original form were as brief and lapidary as the present ones concerning murder, adultery, theft and false witness, and that all perhaps were cast, like these, in a negative mould. Expansion in some of the commandments came afterwards by the addition of such things as homiletic motives for observance and so on; and these were not necessarily the same in the two recensions (as we have seen in connection with the Sabbath observance).

Two questions arise here: (1) Was Moses the author of the Decalogue? In what sense can it be said to originate from him? (2) What was the original form of the Decalogue?

It is noted that the actual Decalogue presupposes a sedentary people given to agriculture, a situation which did not obtain until long after the time of Moses, with the occupation of Canaan. As illustrations of this: (*a*) Among man's property we find mention in Deut. 5:14 of the ox and the ass, for work in the fields, we may take it. The corresponding text of Exodus (20:10) mentions beasts, without specifying, yet surely beasts of burthen are in question; (*b*) 'field' is mentioned expressly in Deut. 5:21 among the properties of the neighbour which are not to be coveted; (*c*) the phrase, 'the stranger that is within your gates' (Exod. 20:10 and Deut. 5:14), seems to presuppose the existence of cities (Deut. 12:15, 16:18), and is difficult to understand in the context of the desert.

Again, what are generally regarded as amplifications betray the style of an epoch subsequent to Moses, namely, the style of the Deuteronomist and sacerdotal schools, which can be dated roughly to the time immediately before and after the Babylonian exile respectively. (*a*) The phrase 'within your gates' to indicate 'within your cities' is typically Deuteronomist (cf. Deut. 14:21, 27:29, 15:7). (*b*) The phrase 'the house of bondage' with reference to Egypt is also typical of Deuteronomy (cf. 6:13, 7:8, 8:14, 13:5, 10). (*c*) Another expression which occurs in the Decalogue: 'those who love me' (Exod. 20:6; Deut. 5:10) is very frequent in Deuteronomy (cf. 10:12, 19:9, 30:6). Earlier, the phrase most frequently encountered in sacred history was 'the fear of God' (with its reverential connotation); the idea of love of God came to Israel through Hosea (ch. 2), and from the prophets passed to Deuteronomy. (*d*) The motivation for the Sabbath observance given in Exod. 20:11 presupposes the sacerdotal account of creation which envisages God working for six days and resting on the seventh. This account stems from about the time of the exile.

1. *Mosaic Origin.*—In discussing the Mosaic origin of the Decalogue, it is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the present recensions as they stand in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and what we might call the 'shorter' Decalogue, that is these recensions shorn of what are obviously later implications, some examples of which we have just seen. It is obvious that the whole text as it stands is not Mosaic; but it is the opinion of

many scholars nowadays that the Decalogue in its substance can be centuries older than the period when it attained its present form; that it can indeed be attributed to the Mosaic period, and that the most likely candidate for authorship of it is Moses himself.

... Formerly it was rather common to deny the Mosaic origin in any sense.[10] The Decalogue was thought of as a summary of the ethical teaching of the eighth to seventh century prophets. But there are grave difficulties against this rather global view of things. It is quite possible to exaggerate the part played by the prophets in determining the character of the Old Testament religion. It might be truer, on the evidence, to say that they were not the first to *enunciate*, but rather they *inherited* the doctrine that true religion of necessity utters itself in morality. And we may infer that this tradition they had from the past. Apart from this altogether, the Decalogue scarcely represents in all its purity the moral teaching of the prophets. It might be more correct therefore to say that the Decalogue, in its present developed state, is a fusion of prophetic religion (mainly ethical in character) and the popular religion of ritual practices; a Deuteronomist redaction due, like Deuteronomy itself, to a priest imbued with prophetic ideas.

Yet, when we have allowed for all later accretions and developments to the Decalogue, the substance remaining will still contain such things as (*a*) the Sabbath observance, and (*b*) the prohibition of images. And many have great difficulty in seeing how such regulations could be of Mosaic origin. Regarding the Sabbath, it seems impossible to conceive of its observance by a pastoral and semi-nomadic people such as Israel was before establishment in Canaan. Pastoral work—the leading of flocks to pasture and caring for them—was a daily task, not susceptible to interruption, as is agriculture. How could the Sabbath observance take place in such an environment? The Sabbath may very well be a Canaanite institution related to agricultural feasts: such indeed it would appear to be in the ritual Decalogue 'on the seventh day you shall rest; in the ploughing time and in harvest time you shall rest' (Exod. 34:21). Against those objections we may say that they are valid, if at all, only with reference to the amplifications of the Sabbath observance, not to its substance. It is also possible that the Sabbath rest was not understood with the same rigidity in every epoch. The substance of the commandment is

[10] 'If we take this document in the form in which we find it in our Bibles, it is clear that it could not have been edited in the Mosaic period... But even if we eliminate these (later features) and reduce the Decalogue to the few and pithy commands of which it must have originally consisted, it still does not seem possible to ascribe it to Moses, as some independent critics would do (Kittel, Sellin, Schmidt, Volz) .... The Decalogue is, like Deuteronomy, a faint echo of the message of the Prophets of the eighth to seventh centuries.'

Ad. Lods: *Israel* (Eng. tr. by Hooke), London, 1932, pp. 315-16.

'Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it', and it must be admitted that it could be observed in accordance with the mode of life at the earliest times.[11]

Concerning the Prohibition of Images.—The ritual Decalogue prohibits explicitly only the 'making of molten gods.' (Exod. 34:17), which leads some to conclude that stone or timber images were permitted; that the prohibition extended only to what might be considered precious materials (*de luxe*), 'gods of gold and silver', the product of an alien civilization which would be objected to in the name of an ancient Israel tradition. The moral Decalogue tightened the prohibition, by proscribing all images (Exod. 20:4; Deut. 5:8). Perhaps we are in the presence of an evolution.

The history of Israel seems to suggest that in earlier times the use of images in worship was lawful in Israel, and certain worthy people sanctioned them in practice by their conduct. In Judges 8:24 ff. we read of Gideon making an ephod—probably a representation of Jahweh—out of the gold of ornaments collected from the Israelites, before which image the people of Israel prostrated themselves. The Deuteronomist editor censures the fact (v. 27 . . . 'all Israel played the harlot after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family . . .'), but the censure dates from the time of the editing process. Judges 17 tells the story of Micah, who in co-operation with his mother consecrated silver to Jahweh, fashioned of it an ephod and teraphim and established a sanctuary for worship. Again, we might conclude from 1 Sam. 19:13 (Michal hiding David from Saul) that David kept divine images (teraphim) in his house. 1 Kings 12:28 describes how Jeroboam set up in Bethel and Dan calves of gold to represent 'God who brought the people out of Egypt'. This act is also censured—later—by the Deuteronomist editor of the book (v. 30). The northern prophets—for example Elijah or Amos—are not on record as protesting against this aberration of Jeroboam. Amos condemns luxury, avarice and cruelty, but not idolatry, which the cult of images would be in the context of the Decalogue. Hosea seems to be the first to condemn the calf of Samaria: 'I have spurned your calf, O Samaria; my anger burns against them . . . The calf of Samaria shall be broken in pieces. For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind' (Hosea 8:5–7). Isaiah and Jeremiah are at one in condemning all representations of the divinity: cf. Isa. 2:8, 18; Jer. 2:26–28. Notice the outright condemnation of Jeremiah: 'you say to a tree, "you are my father", and to a stone, "you gave me birth" . . . But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them arise if they can save you, in your time of trouble; for as many as your cities are your gods, O Judah' (l.c.).

---

[11] Biblical tradition speaks of sojourn in Kadesh of not less than 38 years, during which agricultural activity was possible.

What is to be said about the Decalogue's prohibition of images in the light of these incidents from early Israel history? That the Decalogue, in respect of images, contains elements which are brought to the fore only between the time of Hosea who condemned the golden calf of Samaria, and Jeremiah who censures even symbols of the divinity such as steles. That is one position; perhaps an oversimplified one. It might be better to admit that the evidence of history at this time is somewhat puzzling and inconclusive. Some hold that in no instance—not even in that of Jeroboam or of Micah—is there a clear case of the representation of Jahweh by means of an image. Archaeological evidence bears this out: in no Israelite city has excavation turned up a male image.[12] We might hazard a conclusion that the second commandment was a development by the prophetic school of a consequence latent in the Mosaic prohibition of the worship of other gods. It is worth remembering, however, that Jahvism from its beginning appears as a religion which was aniconic, as distinct from other religions which represented the presence of God by means of images. All the precepts are in that vein.

All considered, therefore, there seems to be no absolutely convincing reason for denying the Mosaic origin of the Decalogue in its substance.[13] Reduced to its simplest formulation, shorn of its motivations which perhaps reflect a later theology, the Decalogue contains just what was needed in the matter of religious beliefs and personal and social moral precepts to constitute the religious and moral charter which would unite the tribes around Jahweh and His cult.

One can understand how this charter could later become a kind of catechisis which priests and levites did not cease to inculcate. One can understand also how it could evolve in close contact with the religious and moral development of the nation. And one may believe that, in course of time, the Decalogue came to be addressed not so much to the nation as to its basic cell, the family; and this shift may have resulted in the amplifications to the fourth (Sabbath), fifth (parents) and tenth, in all of which the family connotation is manifest.

2. *Original Form.*—What was the original form of the Decalogue? Starting from the actual texts of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and trying to work one's way back to what may

---

[12] One sole example seems to have been found in a recent excavation in Hazor; cf. Bright: *History of Israel* (London, 1960), p. 140.

[13] H. H. Rowley (*Moses and the Decalogue:* Bull. of John Rylands Library, 1951-52, pp. 81–118) concludes to the highly probable authenticity of Mosaic authorship of the Decalogue. He asserts that the once popular idea that the Ark of the Covenant originally contained an image has no foundation, and that weekly Sabbath observance goes back to the very earliest form of the Decalogue, and a pre-Mosaic background is not unreasonable despite the nomadic life of the people (Summary, in Hastings, revised Grant and Rowley: *Dictionary of the Bible,* Edinburgh, 1963, art. the Ten Commandments by Woods-Roberts).

be deemed the most primitive form of the Decalogue is a hazardous task. For authors are not even agreed as to the method to be adopted. We are aware of the method proposed by Albrecht Alt[14] with his distinctions between apodictic and casuistic laws. Likewise Mowinkel[15] institutes his own method with a study of categorical precepts. Others—each with his own criterion or basis—try to take away from the actual texts what are regarded as subsequent additions.

In a matter such as this, therefore, one may be pardoned for being brief. As directives towards a tentative reconstruction of the most primitive form of the Decalogue, one might suggest the following rules[16] (We take the Exodus text for convenience' sake): (1) Noting the concise wording of Exod. 20, vv. 13, 14, 15 and even 16, one might conclude that brevity should prevail over length. (2) In the light of this, we may say that when a construction is seen now to be superfluous, it was originally lacking. (3) Seeing the brevity of vv. 13, 14, 15 and 16, as well as their negative character, as also the negative character of vv. 3, 4 and 17—all these together make up eight of the Ten Commandments—one may believe that originally all ten were expressed in negative form. In the present redaction, only v. 8 (Sabbath) and v. 12 (respect for parents) are positive precepts; though the Sabbath has negative elements (forbidding work), and we note that in other codes respect for parents is expressed in a quasi-negative way: e.g.—Exod. 21:15 (Code of Alliance) and Lev. 20:9—'whoever strikes (curses) his parents, shall be put to death.'

The application of these rules in the concrete is not easy, and involves quite a lot of speculation. For example, if we were to consider the commandments from the point of view of (negative) prohibitions only, and count the number of *Lo'* which introduces them, we could count as many as 12 within the present text, as follows: (Exod. 20) vv. 3, 4*a*, 5*a* (twice), 7*a*, 10*b*, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17*a*, 17*b*. That would give us a Dodecalogue, and takes us away from the very ancient tradition that the words are ten.

---

[14] In *Die Ursprunge des Israelitischen Rechts* (1953). Alt distinguishes two kinds of law: case law and statute law. Case law usually has a conditional sentence in the third person with a statement of the case—protasis ('if a man . . .'), and a judicial conclusion—apodosis ('he shall pay . . .'). Cf. Exod. 21:20, 26:33, etc. There is nothing specifically Israelite about such laws; they are common to the ancient Near East. Statute law is usually formulated as a precept or prohibition, most often in the second person singular ('You shall not . . .'). According to Alt, this statute law always ends in categorical prohibitions, though with some variety; and it is typically Israelite and connected with Jahweh. Within this he classes the Decalogue. (Cf. G. J. Botterweck: *The Form and Growth of the Decalogue*, Concilium, Eng. ed., May 1965, p. 33).

[15] In *Le Decalogue*, Paris, 1927.

[16] Cf. A. T. Patrick: *La formation Litteraire et l'Origine Historique du Decalogue*, Ephem. Theol. Lovan., 40 (1964), 243.

Examining vv. 4 and 5, we readily conclude that they contain amplifications. Verse 5 for example does not tie up well with what precedes; the pronouns and pronominal suffixes seem to refer, not to v. 4 but to v. 3, to the 'other gods' mentioned there. Verse 4 itself shows some ambiguity: it is not easy to know that images are prohibited—those of Jahweh mentioned in the first place, or those of the 'other gods' whose worship is prohibited (v. 3). All considered, it is probable that in v. 4 we have a commandment which was, at least initially, distinct; so in vv. 2–6 we would have two commandments which inculcate two important aspects of the primitive faith of Israel: rejection of other gods than Jahweh, and prohibition of their images in worship.

In a matter which is largely speculation, let us simply put down a list of the Ten Commandments in what authors generally think may have been their original form: (1) You shall not have other gods; (2) You shall not make sculptured images; (3) You shall not take the name of Jahweh in vain; (4) Six days you may labour and do all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath for the Lord your God; on it you shall not do any work; (5) Do not dishonour your father or mother; (6) You shall not kill; (7) You shall not commit adultery; (8) You shall not steal; (9) You shall not bear false witness; (10) You shall not covet your neighbour's house.[17]

IV. Meaning of Some Precepts

Any discussion concerning the Decalogue must necessarily touch on the meaning of certain of the commandments (Again taking Exod. 20): (*a*) 4: *pesel*—'graven image' or 'sculptured image'. The prohibition refers, in the first place, to the cult of Jahweh, which does not necessarily imply images *of* Jahweh. Also perhaps those of 'other gods', which once admitted in Israel, could endanger the cult of Jahweh. (*b*) v. 7: take God's name 'in vain' (*lāššawé* from *šw'*). The meaning is uncertain; perhaps it intends to proscribe all abuse of the name of Jahweh for purposes of deceit. Stamm thinks along the lines of prohibition of malediction or sorcery.[18] Buis-Leclercq propose 'thing without value' as translation, and see the forbidding of perjury and magic.[19] One notes that this word is also used in Deuteronomy in v. 20 (9th Commandment) '*vain* witness against neighbour'—forbidding false oaths before tribunals. (*c*) v. 13: *Lō' tirṣaḥ* (from *raṣaḥ*) is usually rendered simply: 'You shall

[17] Cf. Patrick, L.c.p. 245–47. For an alternative reconstruction, cf. J. M. Powis Smith, *The Origin and History of Hebrew Law* (Chicago, 1931), pp. 6-7.

[18] J. J. Stamm: *Dreissig Jahre Dekalogforschung*, in Theol. Rundsch, t. 27, 1961, p. 297.

[19] P. Buis-J. Leclercq: *Le Deuteronome*, in Sources Bibliques, Paris, 1963, p. 69.

not *kill*' whereas it is better translated 'You shall not murder', i.e. kill in an illegal manner. There is no connection here with war, or capital punishment; the precept cannot be invoked against these or in support of pacifism. (*d*) v. 15: 'You shall not *steal*' (*Lō' tignobh*—from *ganabh*). Alt has suggested that this commandment originally referred to the *enslavement* of free Israelites.[20] One factor which led him to this conclusion is the meaning proposed for '*ḥāmad*' in v. 17. Lexicographers give as meaning of *ḥāmad*: 'an impulse, followed almost necessarily by corresponding acts', and some see in the tenth commandement the prohibition of acts as well as desires. Thus all stealing ('house') would be forbidden under this head, and we have to find a different meaning for v. 15 (eighth commandment). Against this argumentation, it is well to remember that, even if *ḥāmad* is taken to mean 'an impulse, followed almost necessarily by corresponding acts', directly, it is the desire as such, not the act, which is prohibited. Covet in v. 17 is better accepted in its traditional meaning of 'desire'; and seen as forbidding impulses which might lead a man to transgress the precepts preceding it (vv. 13–16). A man in effect commits murder, adultery, steals, bears false witness precisely in the measure that desires lead him to appropriate the 'house' of another. Prohibition of covetousness, an interior act, has often been thought to be too subtle for primitive Israel belief. But this is not very convincing. No great subtlety was required to see that inner desire is at the root of wrongdoing.

Conclusion

Such then is the Decalogue in its origin, with its textual problems, and its significance. Despite its limitations (negative character, brevity, concern with justice, inadequate concept of retribution, etc.), it still has so many merits that it is regarded as a charter of fundamental morality even in Christianity. Some of its precepts are singled out for comment by Jesus when He refers to the law which He has come not to destroy but to fulfil (Matt. 5). The young man in the Gospel (Matt. 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20), who wished to enter into life, was told by Jesus to keep the commandments. Paul (Rom. 13:8 ff.) lists some of the commandments—adultery, kill, steal, covet—while asserting at the same time that all are summed up in the love of neighbour.

Of course the question of the law and of the liberty of the spirit will always be with us. We know that Christ ushered in the new law, 'the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus', which has set us free from 'the law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:2). We are no longer 'under the law but under grace' (Rom. 6:14). And the great preacher and vindicator of this

[20] Examples of the use of *ganabh* with reference to persons: Exod. 21:16; Deut. 24:7.

freedom was Paul, who had experience both of life under the law and under grace. But Paul was no antinomian. Having died to the law, Paul learned to live to it again, in a nobler way. He was not under the law, yet not lawless either; 'being not without law unto God, but under the law of Christ' (that expressive, almost untranslatable phrase: μὴ ὢν ἄνομος Θεοῦ ἀλλ' ἔννομος Χριστοῦ (1 Cor. 9:21). God's law ceases to press upon him as merely external power. The Christian man is 'in law' as he is 'in Christ'; the law is an interior principle, constraining him only with the internal power of the Spirit. And certainly the law, epitomized in the Decalogue, has played its part in awakening man's conscience and disciplining the moral faculties. The law, received from Christ, revised and spiritualized, planted by faith along with Christ in the believer's heart (Jer. 31:33), becomes for the first time really valid and effective. And in this context, perhaps, there is a vital relationship between the 'tablets of stone' and 'the inner murmurings of the heart'.

In his attitude to the law, Jesus is at once decisive and flexible; He is an expert who knows the inner mind and real intent of that which He expounds. He is the supreme exegete who carries forward to their logical issues the complex lines of Hebrew revelation. He penetrates the outer shell and reaches the kernel of Old Testament legislation, and plainly regards Himself as the focus of it all.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to the standard commentaries, and the books and articles mentioned in the footnotes, reference should be made to the following:

Articles in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, edited by G. H. Anderson, S.C.M. Press.

Johannes Blauw, 'The Biblical View of Man in His Religion'.

A. C. Bouquet, 'Revelation and the Divine Logos'.

L. H. Wolf, 'The Interpenetration of Christianity and the non-Christian Religions'.

W. Freytag, *The Gospel and the Religions*. I.M.C. Pamphlet, 1957.

A. G. Hogg, 'The Christian Attitude to non-Christian Faith' in *The Authority of the Faith*. I.M.C., Tambaram, 1938.

G. Johnston, 'Christian Mission and Prevenience'. Article in *Theology Today*, April, 1963.

K. V. Reichelt, 'The Johannine Approach'. Article in *The Authority of the Faith*. I.M.C., Tambaram, 1938.

Paul Verghese, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in the Age of Universal History'. Article in *The Ecumenical Review*, October, 1962.