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ANCIENT ISRAEL: A MODEL FOR TODAY?*

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The old-fashioned school copybook had a proverb in copperplate as top line to each page, then about a dozen practice lines below. Notoriously the standard of writing kept deteriorating as it descended the page — the child was then imitating, not the excellent original, but his own very imperfect imitation of that original. The Jew possessed the perfect oracles of God, but Targum, Talmud, Midrash, all the cabbalistic literature intervened — tragically he began to imitate the copies, forgetting the divine original. But what exactly was the top line he should have continued to copy? Where do we find in a nutshell the very quintessence of Old Covenant teaching? Surely the answer is the Decalogue, those Ten revealed Commandments, which epitomise the whole duty of man, Godwards and manwards, and require his total obedience I Sam 15:12-23; Is 1:19-20; Jer 35. Originally a Sinai covenant or *foedus* between Yahweh and His ancient Jewish people, this marvellous Decalogue has an ethical and spiritual scope which is universal, it is a top line, a *norma*, a prescriptive pattern for all humanity to copy.

The Book of the Covenant (Exod 20-23) begins with the Ten Commandments, goes on to a midrashic exposition of them. The Commandments are repeated, with minor variations, in Deut 5. Our basic Hebrew source here is Exod 20:1-17. Here is the golden thread, the revealed guideline, which declares to man: Here is the way, walk ye in it!"¹

We assume confidently that the Decalogue was divinely revealed to Moses, that we need not expend precious time on destructive Wellhausian criticism. The pronouns and suffixes in Exod 20 are consistently masculine singular — incredibly, Gerhardus Vos terms them feminine singular (p. 131), but this must surely be a printer's error. Each Commandment is addressed in the first instance to the nation Israel in the context of the miraculous recent Exodus; in the second instance, individually and personally to every human being of every age who comes within the sound of Jewish or Christian teaching. Thou and its concomitant forms are needed to bring this out properly — our language is stupidly impoverished, in liturgy, theology and daily conversation, by

*A version of this paper was read at the 1985 Conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society.

1. Is. 30:21. Suggested reading: IBD arts. 'Ten Commandments', 'Book of the Covenant', pp. 1533 ff, 331 f; John Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii. 1-59, 1559; Puritan Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 1692, rep. 1970; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, 1880, pp. 259-465; Gerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 1948, rep. 1975, pp. 129-143.

the YOU cult. THIS oldster might have made a good Quaker — at least in the civilized use of the personal pronouns. The range and comprehensiveness of the Decalogue is a perennial marvel. We miss its searchlight power if we restrict ourselves to its external precepts — these, as Calvin points out, require not merely “outward decency”, but also “inward spiritual righteousness”, “purity of heart”. He adds: “The murder which the soul commits is wrath and hatred; the theft, covetousness and avarice; and the adultery, lust”. Every prohibition of a vice presupposes the firm inculcation of its opposite virtue. Certainly you must not push a man into the river to drown. But if he is in already, and you are a good swimmer, you must rescue him. The Decalogue, properly interpreted, becomes like the Sermon on the Mount in anticipation. There was a literal house of bondage in Egypt, there is a spiritual house of bondage for every sinning child of man. The Commandments reveal our sin, pinpoint our continuing need. Antinomianism in any shape or form remains a detestable heresy.

We deal here, all too briefly, with three topics: (1) What is the Hebrew text of the Decalogue saying to us today? This includes selective illustration of the Commandments from parallel Scriptures, particularly of the Old Testament — ancient Israel did not always copy the top line too well. This will be our longest section — it really includes two intertwined themes, which cannot readily be separated. (2) How far is the Decalogue a model for the Christian today, who claims grace as well as law? (3) Who were, who are now, the Church, the people of God? How do we relate Jews of the Old Covenant to Christians of the New? What, if any, are their common factors?

I. Turning to the Commandments, the First runs literally in Hebrew: There shall not be to thee — to anybody, that is — another God before My face. Jehovah claims absolute, exclusive loyalty. The Jewish cult was monolatry, with the underlying assumption of monotheism, this Commandment forbids polylatry. But surely we are not pagan polytheists, worshipping multiple deities? Be assured that if a child, a sweetheart, a political or religious leader, any thing or person whatsoever, becomes adored more than God, this is culpable polylatry, we become breakers of the Commandment. Roman Mariolaters, Protestant doctrinaires, must both beware.

Puritan Thomas Watson remarks that the First Commandment forbids worshipping a false God; the Second forbids worshipping the true God in a false manner. The Hebrew text of the Second clearly forbids the manufacturing of any idol or image (*pesel*), or of any likeness or semblance (*temurah*) of Deity. (Commemorative statues of famous mortals are not forbidden, only pictorial representations of Deity.) The supreme sin of ancient Israel was the golden calf, Exod 32. The Roman Church has a guilty conscience here — you need but glance into one of her sanctuaries to perceive innumerable images. That is why she drops the Second Commandment, and subdivides the Tenth, to keep the number right. But this is tampering with the Word of God. Like the Jews after the Babylonian Captivity, we may eschew crude physical idolatry, yet there are subtler substitutes we must beware. The Sacraments, Church

membership, good works, become idols, when we depend on them for salvation. We have a jealous God — *qannàh* is the Hebrew term — who will not give His glory to another. The Song of Solomon properly understood, allegorically, that is, deals with the marriage relationship between God and Israel, Christ and the Church or individual believer. The jealousy reflected is of a conjugal character, a fierce resentment of that spiritual adultery which is idolatry in any form. This Commandment reaches further, and bites deeper, than we think.

The Third Commandment forbids invoking God's Name unto emptiness, vanity, falsehood — Hebrew *saw* — forbids ALL careless or profane use of that Name. Millions of times do Frenchmen say *Adieu*, Britishers *Goodbye*, forgetful that they thereby invoke their Maker. Perjury is the main point here — calling God to witness to a deliberate lie, whether the oath be assertatory or promissory. There is no need to outlaw all oaths, like the Reformation Anabaptists — some are right and proper, but they should never be trivial or colloquial. An interesting point: How can an atheist, without blasphemy, give testimony on oath in a lawcourt? The Jesuit practice of uttering oaths with mental reservations was utterly abominable. Jephthah and Herod should have broken their crazy oaths, they sinned more grievously in fulfilling them. Vos associates this Commandment closely with pagan name magic, execration and adjuration — into that field, we cannot enter here.

The Jewish Sabbath commemorated Creation, rested the body, promoted worship, communion and spiritual instruction, constituted a perpetual covenant sign between God and His people (Exod 31; Ezk 20:12). Psalm 92 reflects Jewish sabbatarian devotion in its finest flower. For extreme severity, even to the death sentence, see Num 15:32-36; for eloquent blessing, Is 58:13-14; for commination and promise combined, Jer 17:20-27. The Fourth Commandment binds the Christian also, though the day of the week, the particular emphasis, have changed, Christ's Resurrection is now commemorated. The Lord's Day becomes more rounded and explicit in the Apostolic Fathers, our earliest Patristic texts in Greek. Yet the canonical authority is ample — see Rev 1:10, and the records of our Lord's post-Resurrection appearances to the disciples; also the solemn and explicit words of Westminster Confession XXI.vii,viii.

In the Fifth Commandment — first of the Second Table, first with promise — we note that "parents" may be political (kings and magistrates); those venerable by seniority; spiritual fathers; natural parents. These must be disobeyed ONLY if they command what contravenes God's Law. Such was the severity of the Mosaic Law that a chap could be stoned to death for cursing a parent (Ex 21:17).

The Sixth Commandment forbids murder. Justly administered capital punishment is not murder — neither is the soldier's hateful task on the battlefield, however abhorrent this may be to his normally compassionate instincts. Nothing whatsoever can justify those once fashionable duels, arising from trivial quarrels — they were murderous, sacrilegious and abominable. Watson is fascinating on this Commandment. He lists twelve means of murder: the hand; the mind — i.e. malice, or murder of the heart; the tongue; the pen; plotting; poison; witchcraft; intention (cf.

Matt 2:13); consent — cf. Saul watching Stephen's death; failure to hinder or intervene; judicial failure to enforce capital punishment where this is richly deserved. If, says Watson, a felon commits six murders, the judge who had power to condemn him to death the first time, and failed to do so, is guilty of five of them. Suicide also is a crime of the first magnitude. Any wilful murder destroys the image of God in a man — that is what makes it so heinous, that is why the abolition of the death penalty within living memory is so unscriptural, and so wicked.

Fornication is a serious sin, especially if it leaves an unmarried mother callously abandoned. The adultery specifically forbidden in the Seventh Commandment is more serious, it criminally smashes up one or two existing and sacred marriage contracts, often cruelly wronging innocent parties, for the mere indulgence of lust. If two married couples engage by quadripartite agreement in the dirty game of "wife-swapping", then four people have committed adultery, even though there was no complication of deceit. A society which winks at such things is approaching the decadence of Imperial Rome. In the days of the death penalty, there was considerable sympathy for the husband who slaughtered the adulterous wretch who had violated his wife — this rested on natural jealousy, with extreme provocation, and was felt to fall short of fully culpable murder. Marriage is man's normal estate, and absolutely exclusive. Celibacy may be advisable if there is a legacy of insanity, or of transmissible disease. In 1 Cor 7:26 Paul is not advocating universal celibacy, he is offering practical advice for "the present distress". The nearest modern parallel, familiar here in the early 'forties, may be a soldier on embarkation leave, rushing into marriage with a girl he may not see again for years, if ever. The human situation evokes much sympathy — yet such marriages produced a vast crop of young widows, with a fatherless child. They were not immoral, but were they well-considered? Marriage is not a sacrament, it does not, as Rome falsely maintains, confer grace — there is no perfect world yet, despite abundance of marriages! In circumstances of serious distress or incompatibility, chaste separation is a viable alternative to divorce, especially if there is hope of ultimate reconciliation. Divorce becomes doubly ugly when it is obviously intended to facilitate re-marriage. Our Lord interprets the Seventh Commandment in Matt 5:27-32, requiring purity, not merely in act but also in the less easily controlled areas of word and thought. Adultery of the eye is sin in God's sight — who then is guiltless down here?

In the Prophets physical adultery is frequently linked with the spiritual whoredom of idolatry, which breaks the mystical marriage relationship between Yahweh and Israel. In the heathenish practices of Canaan, as in Israel's decline, idolatry and adultery frequently went together. See for example Is 57:3-12; Jer 3:1-4; and the scorching contempt of Jer 5:8.

Whilst all property rights cease with death, the Eighth Commandment, Thou shalt not steal, is a necessary provision for the fair and peaceful ordering of interim mortal society. Thieves, Watson declared, are the "caterpillars of society" — especially those actuated, not by need, but by greed, or by sheer bone laziness. Theft, the "daughter of avarice", usually springs from covetousness. The highly respectable, Churchgoing,

merchant, who adulterates his milk or cheese, or who grossly overcharges on false pretences, may be as great a thief as the felon in jail. Income tax returns, the use of time within which we are paid for services, call also for scrupulous honesty.

The Ninth Commandment enacts: Thou shalt not witness any testimony of deceit against thy neighbour. The primary reference is juridical. A dishonest advocate may bear false witness, may even incriminate innocent persons, to manipulate an undeserved reprieve for his evil client. The commonest form of perjury is false witness against an innocent person, to incriminate him, to gain some legal advantage for oneself or another — this is criminal in the highest degree. Of course OUR consciences are clear! WE would not do anything so outrageous! We forget that we break this Commandment every time we repeat a malicious, unchecked story against another person, or belittle his character. Such is what Calvin called that “odious crimination which springs from malicious and petulant love of slander”. Watson designates three fences to keep our unruly tongues in order — the lips, the teeth — and the Ninth Commandment!

Unlike the others, the Tenth Commandment, Thou shalt not covet . . . , looks right inside the heart, penetrates to depths where only God can see, depths of which we are but imperfectly conscious ourselves. Covetousness is the mother sin, the radical vice, which unchecked can lead to the transgression of all the Commandments. See 1 Tim 6:10. Some have argued from Rom 7:7 that Paul is confessing to covetousness as his personal and besetting sin. I have my doubts, this may be reading too much into the verse. Unquestionably this sin stems from greed, envy, deeply engrained self-love, no human being is entirely free from it, though some control or conceal it better than others. Despite its ugly cynicism, there is irrefutable truth in the pungent remark of Montesquieu: “Every man has a secret satisfaction even in the misfortune of his dearest friends”. The temptation to covet may come unexpectedly. Suppose you are browsing in your friend’s library. You spot a book in Latin, a book you happen to want very much for some particular research you are doing. You know your friend cannot read Latin, the volume is a piece of junk to him. What are you to do? Drop crude hints? No, no, a thousand times no! Just say very firmly inside yourself: Thou-shalt not covet!

II. How does law operate in the realm of grace? That is our second topic.²

The modernist is usually antinomian at heart, airily quoting the second half of Rom 6:14, not under law, but under grace. Law is tedious and old-fashioned, emancipated man should be free from its shackles. Even gross sins of the flesh may be discounted, under the umbrella of misnamed love. We have only to look at the soaring divorce rate, abortion, illegitimacy, the stockpiling menace of venereal disease, to see where permissive antinomianism has led us. That leaves unmentioned

2. See further Westminster Conf. XIX; Larger Cat. Qq. 93-99; R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 1878, rep. 1972, pp. 351-357; John Murray’s address, “The Sanctity of Moral Law”, in *Claims of Truth*, 1976, pp. 193-204; etc.

drink, drugs, gambling, the thievery and sharp practice that is steadily corroding our national integrity. But what about the first half of the verse? Sin is not to reign, tyrannize, over the believer — Paul never suggests, here or elsewhere, that sin will ever completely die in this mortal life. Antinomian or orthodox, we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, where our human smokescreens and pretences will be ruthlessly torn from us. Expositor Shedd remarked to comfort us that “sin in fragments is weaker than holiness in mass”. Nevertheless holiness requires to be organized and exercised!

Of course the Decalogue is absolutely binding on the Christian, but it cannot save him, because he cannot perfectly keep it (Gal 2:16; Jas 2:10). The opening verses of Rom 8 and countless other Scriptures pinpoint the only hope for sinner man, the atonement provided for him by Jesus Christ. Yet our Lord’s counsel to the Rich Young Ruler is full of the Decalogue — likewise Paul’s pastoral advice in 1 Cor 6:9-11. 1 Cor 8 is motivated by compassion for the weaker brother who might, through the stronger brother’s “liberty”, become tempted to break the Second Commandment. In exact parallel, the self-controlled Christian minister who takes the occasional glass of wine at a wedding reception may do HIMSELF no harm — but what of the watching teenager, who assumes that his minister’s example must be reliable, and follows it with ultimately disastrous results? We heartily agree with John Murray’s declaration, that “the directing principle of love is objectively revealed statutory commandments” — again when he says “Abolish or abrogate law, and you deny the reality of sin” — in other words, you enthrone antinomianism.

It is customary to distinguish three uses of the law or Decalogue: (1) The *usus politicus*, which amounts to the restraint of sin in unredeemed humanity by common grace. Certain Calvinists deny the reality of common grace — the Hoeksemas, for example — but would you like to live in a world where unredeemed man’s sin went to its worst excesses without divine restraint?

(2) The *usus pedagogicus* reveals to man his sin, convicts him of it, and acts as a schoolmaster to Christ.

(3) By the *usus didacticus*, commonly called the *tertius usus legis*, the law becomes a rule of life to the believer. This salutary effect is denied by antinomians — but then, they don’t know any better!

The relationship of law and grace is admirably summed up in the Westminster Confession, Chapter XIX, where the Decalogue is described as a perfect rule of righteousness, binding upon all, including those already justified. It is not a covenant of works — emphatically not! — it is a rule of life, informing us of the will of God, discovering to us the pollution of our nature. All this is substantially repeated in the Larger Catechism, Qq. 93-99. We note there (Q.96) the alternative uses of the law to unregenerate men — either “to awaken their consciences to flee from the wrath to come”, or else to “leave them inexcusable”. Q.99 enacts eight detailed and excellent rules for the application of the Decalogue, some of which we have encountered already. These are superbly applied by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount (notably in

Matt 5:17-48), and elsewhere. The searching words of the Catechism, “to require the utmost perfection in every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin”, might fill us with blank despair, had we not a Saviour to whom we may turn. The Rich Young Ruler said concerning the Commandments, and with all outward sincerity: All these have I kept from my youth up. How little he had grasped of their inwardness! And how little he knew his own heart!

III. Our third topic might be encapsulated: For whom was the Decalogue intended? We have already answered: For all mankind, in potential. But there are untold millions of Moslems, Buddhists, Confucians, Communists, Western pagans . . . who remain totally ignorant of the Decalogue. In practical terms this divine Law was meant for the Church. But what do we mean by the Church? This links with the broad theme of the Conference.³

The word *ekklesia*, the called-out body, has three successive historic meanings: (1) An assembly of public-minded citizens in a free city state of ancient pagan Greece. (2) The nation of Israel in religious assembly — cf. Deut 31 and 1 Kgs 8. (3) The Church of Christ, the new Israel of God — cf. Gal 6.16. The Belgic Confession, Art.27 proclaims “one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His Blood, Sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit . . . spread and dispersed over the whole world; yet joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit”. The other Reformed symbols are in broad agreement with this. This Church has four cardinal, intrinsic characteristics: (1) unity — in Christ, that is, not in any manmade ecumenical federation; (2) catholicity — that is, a world spread, transcending all racial, national and social barriers; (3) holiness — again in Christ, and notwithstanding much earthly unholiness; (4) apostolicity — in foundational reference, that is, not in dubious succession claims. Added to these are three distinguishing marks: the preaching of the Word; the proper administration of the Sacraments; and discipline. Calvin emphasised the discipline so sharply that some of his successors have preferred to modify or forget it. Once again the Reformed symbols are fairly unanimous, we pass over an extensive field in brief compass. There is an ancient adage, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Whilst God has called some in solitary or otherwise extraordinary circumstances, redemption is usually attained in association with those whom God has already redeemed. That remains the best place to look for it — Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds’ tents (Cant 1:8).

The Israelites, the ancient covenant people of God, were certainly intended to keep the Decalogue, however clearly the prophetic denunciations show up their many lamentable failures. Some undoubted-

3. Suggested reading: arts. ‘Church’, NIDCC and rev. ISBE, Vol I; John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, esp. first twelve chapters; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1966 and later reps., pp. 561-726 (esp. first five chaps. of this section) — too supralapsarian for me, but a fine book; Stephen Benco, *The Meaning of the Sanctorum Communio*, Studies in Historical Theology, 1964.

ly made a better approximation than others, as Mal 3:16-18 clearly reveals. Indeed there was always a faithful remnant, just as there is always an election of grace under the New Covenant. I believe that these two groups, the redeemed Jews of the old dispensation, converted Gentiles of the new, are all God's children, they possess a continuity, the Ten Commandments are quite specifically addressed to both. There is a sense in which the true Church of God has enjoyed an unbroken history, at least from Abraham down to the present day, a sense in which the patriarch and the modern Christian both look to the same Christ, though the modern Christian possesses a fuller revelation of His Person (John 8:56). One would like to be more precise here — but that would take us right into the disputations of amillennialists and premillennialists, Zionists and anti-Zionists. The tangled realms of controversial eschatology do not fall within our immediate remit.

One last thought, on the Christian side: What precisely is the communion of saints? The Greek phrase, *koinonia tōn hagiōn*, and the Latin *sanctorum communio*, are both inescapably ambiguous, the genitive plurals could be either masculine or neuter. The communion of saints naturally requires the masculine, with a personal interpretation; the neuter suggests the sacramental or eucharistic view, associating the phrase specifically with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Stephen Benco, with great linguistic and Patristic learning, argues the sacramental view — yet one feels, reading through his monograph, that he rather flogs the side which suits his theology. John Owen (Vol. I, p. 492) defines the communion of saints as “an holy conjunction between all God's people, wrought by their participation of the same Spirit, wherein we are all made members of that one Body whereof Christ is the Head”. This union he goes on to describe as “spiritual and internal . . . external and ecclesiastical in the same outward ordinances” (cf, also Vol. IX, p. 266). This is predominantly the personal interpretation, with subsidiary acknowledgment of the sacramentarian view. This allows operation between Christian and Christ; between Christian and fellow Christian; possibly more widely — but excluding such heretical notions as prayer for the dead — between the Church militant and the Church triumphant. The Westminster Standards take much the same line as John Owen — it is sufficient here to compare *Confession XXVI* with *Larger Catechism* Q. 168. Another Puritan, preaching on the Lord's Supper about 1554, said, long before Owen's time: “The Supper used to be called of the Fathers *eucharistiam*, a thanksgiving. This is the communion of saints which we believe in our Creed, which hath waiting on it remission of sins, resurrection of the flesh, and life everlasting” (John Bradford, *Works* Vol. I, p. 107).

Summing up, we can concede that Benco cannot be condemned outright, that thoroughly evangelical sources give him a measure of support. Nevertheless we feel that, of the two grammatically possible interpretations of the phrase *sanctorum communio*, he has unduly exalted the one of minor importance, that the phrase is much more meaningful in its English form, as reflecting particularly the company of God's people on earth.