



Etched in Stone: The Emergence of the Decalogue

David H. Aaron, T & T Clark, 2006

This book engages the best known biblical passage – the so-called “Ten Commandments” – as a vehicle for uncovering the compositional history of the *Torah*. Aaron argues that the Ten Commandments (or “Decalogue,” as it is known from the earliest Greek renderings of Scripture) are developed relatively late in the literary time-line of the Pentateuch. By situating the origins of the Ten Commandments in the wilderness narrative, the writers were able to provide the document with both antiquity and authority. But a critical survey of biblical literature demonstrates no cognizance of the Ten Commandments prior to the post-exilic period (after 586 B.C.E.). In effect, the Ten Commandments were written to

consecrate Israel’s ethnic identity at a time when domestic independence had been lost and dispersion among the nations had become a reality.

Building upon the scholarship of others, Aaron suggests that the Mount Sinai episode – when Moses ascends the mountain to receive divinely inscribed stone tablets – was created as a symbol for rallying the people around a unique conceptualization of God as the giver of law, not through a king, but directly to a people through a prophet. As such, the traditional station of “king” was shown to be irrelevant to the notion of peoplehood. By placing Israel in Sinai with God, the authors of the *Torah* established a very simple premise for Jewish identity, one very much at odds with what functioned for the other nations of the world. Most nations drew their identity from a king and his governance over a land and its polity, as well as its indigenous religion(s). When that king was defeated, when that land was conquered, identities waned and assimilation into the new polity and ethnicity was all but guaranteed over time. Hence, there are no Assyrians or Phoenicians, Moabites or Ammonites wandering the planet today. In contrast, by showing its origins to have been in the wilderness – a place that belonged to no one and was ruled by no person – the *Torah*’s authors demonstrated that peoplehood could be established on the basis of covenantal documents (*Torah*) and religious governance (priest and prophet instead of king and courtier). Moreover, on the basis of its literature, Israel could achieve a sense of solidarity even as its destiny was to be dispersed among the nations of the earth. The essential role of the *Torah* was to reverse the historical pattern experienced by all other nations: to establish a basis for religious and cultural identity despite the loss of land, king, and political autonomy.

The actual text of the Decalogue plays only a small role in Aaron’s latest book (the last chapter). As he points out, the Ten Commandments known by most people are those recorded in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Except for the commandment to observe the Sabbath, there is nothing expressed in these chapters that one might identify as particularly “Jewish.” In fact, the laws are rather mundane in character, shared by all other cultures known to have recorded legal codes governing social interactions. Even the opening passage of the Ten Commandments, which constitutes an allegiance oath, parallels literary forms known in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. What is unique to Israel is the framing of this document, not its contents. Aaron discusses at length the evolution of the very notion of creating a *covenant scene* by which Israel committed itself to worshiping Israel’s God exclusively. Worship here needs to be understood not only as expressions of allegiance and praise, but also as observance of divinely sanctioned rituals and legal precepts.

The Supreme Court was hearing cases on the display of Decalogue Tablets in courthouses in Texas and Kentucky just as the manuscript was being copy edited. While this book will have no impact on the political agenda of those who champion the display of Decalogue lawn ornaments and courthouse tablets, Aaron did revamp his “Epilogue” at the last minute to touch upon the Supreme Court’s decisions as they became public in June 2005. What was so interesting to Aaron is that the Court considered the *historical* significance of the Ten Commandments in the development of western jurisprudence. Given his understanding of the document’s development, the court essentially caved in to the religiously motivated depiction of that history rather than consider the scholarship that undermines that depiction in many ways. (*Excerpt on next page*)

[T]he biblical text itself, taken by many contemporary religionists to be a univocal document, is the result of many competing ideologies. Throughout this volume evidence has been amassed to show how writers frequently used similar materials to frame their distinct – if not conflicting – understandings of covenant and society. My sense is that the writers of the various documents would have stood aghast at seeing the destiny of their compositions, merged into a single narrative with little regard for their unique contributions or obvious disparities. The redactors of the final version did not see it this way. Perhaps they did not recognize the tensions among the various literary sources they drew upon; or perhaps they believed that the distinct ideologies were conducive to harmonization, not only through the very act of placing them side by side but also by means of a distinct interpretive strategy that allowed ostensibly conflicting passages to be reinterpreted in light of the dominant redactional ideology.

The Torah involves a conceptualization of history which echoes what Mikhail Bakhtin

redacting literature related to the epic past – the most valorized of times – the biblical writers saw no reason to insist upon the same principles of temporality and consistency as those expected in narratives about the present and future. They appear to have conceptualized their subject matter as the valorization of the social and religious ideal. As such, the notion that the merging of distinct ideologies might violate the integrity of a discrete literary strand only emerges for those who work outside of the epic's own rules and who fail to exercise what has sometimes been called "the principle of charity" in the act of interpretation. This principle holds that statements are interpretable only when there is a maximized agreement between a speaker's (or in our case, a writer's) beliefs about the world and those held by his or her interpreters. As Donald Davidson explains, when we are motivated by a strong principle of charity in interpreting, we seek to maximize agreement between ourselves and a speaker even when comprehension is difficult. The alternative is to assert that the latter's comments make no sense. To avoid this, we readily attribute self-consistency to the speaker or writer even in the face of incoherence, because our desire to understand what they are saying or writing is

shaped by our belief that the speaker or writer is, indeed, sensible. The application of this principle in the context of our redactional process toward canon should be self-evident. The redactor was motivated to see in the inherited documents not only cogency, but evidence of the very same ideology he held to be true in his own writings. For scholars, all words are created equal, subject to reading like all other words, without privilege to a circumscribed interpretive strategy. But should one claim that this uncharitable devalorization of the text is a decidedly modern act, I would insist that they are mistaken. The tools for the destabilization of the text were already wielded by the biblical authors themselves. That is why we have so many versions of how to strike a covenant with God. That is why we have Horeb and Sinai and Zion and Gilgal and Shechem. And that is why we have canonization, the most exclusive of all literary acts.

As an interpreter of the text, I would argue that there is nothing particularly inspiring about the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. As noted, the only religious theme common to both is the Shabbat law. Otherwise, the laws that constitute those commandments are rather



refers to as *valorized time*. When

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Aaron's publications have been in the areas of Biblical studies, Midrash, the history of interpretation, and recently on contemporary issues in religion and politics. Pursuing a deep interest in linguistics, Aaron's first book, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Brill, 2001), merges contemporary semantic theory with biblical exegesis, especially regarding metaphorical imagery in the Hebrew Bible. In March 2006, *Etched in Stone: The Emergence of the Decalogue* (T & T Clark) was published. This work traces the origins of the Ten Commandments to elucidate the compositional history of the Pentateuch. Aaron is currently at work on a study of post-modern historiographic theory and its potential impact on our views of antiquity. He has published numerous scholarly articles in a variety of journals, including *Harvard Theological Review*, *Journal of the Academy of Religion*, *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, and *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*. He is also a contributor to the *Brill Encyclopedia of Midrash* (2005) and the *Blackwell Companion to Judaism* (2004).

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generic. Even the prologues, requiring allegiance to Yahweh, are decidedly less eloquent than the prologues that have survived in other ancient Near Eastern law codes, which regularly explain that the purpose of law is to establish justice and to foster peaceful coexistence. The biblical prologue's concern with allegiance to history's God says little about the importance of law in society in contrast to the prologues to the law collections ascribed to the ancient Mesopotamian rulers Lipit-Ishtar and Hammurabi. . . .

The Decalogue traditions were devised as allegiance documents framed to depict God and the Israelite people as having entered directly into a covenantal relationship. Neither priest nor king was relevant, and consequently the content of the standard prologue structures found in older law codes lacked feasibility in the current context. The Decalogue was about a personal promise that took on corporate significance, rather than a king's promise to create a livable society through the imposition of law and order. In fact, no cluster of verses in the Pentateuch frames law in the manner found in the prologues to the law compendia of Lipit-Ishtar or Hammurabi. By getting everyone to express allegiance to their God individually, the society established a bond that was simultaneously communal and spiritual. As such, it is not the *meaning* of the Decalogue's words that proves terribly impressive; it is rather the *use* of this document that results in its cultural and religious significance.

It will undoubtedly have been discerned that I consider the tablets of the Ten Commandments a literary fiction. The social attitude toward this literary image has varied greatly over time. Even its graphic depiction has changed over the centuries. Early in the history of Christian and Jewish medieval art, the tablets were invariably

depicted as two square or rectangular slabs. The current vogue of depicting the stones as joined together, each with a rounded top, only became popular after the Enlightenment. That a literary fiction should take the form of a five-thousand-pound granite monument, as it did in the Alabama Supreme Court building in 2001, is comical, given the historical purpose of the *portable* stones Moses placed in the ark. But then, the history of the Decalogue is little else if not paradoxical. Consider the awkward relationship of medieval Christendom to the Ten Commandments as a symbol. On the one hand, England's King Alfred (849–899) thought the Decalogue so significant that he prefaced his laws with the Ten Commandments as well as the Precepts of Charity. In contrast, medieval Christian art frequently depicted the Synagogue as a blindfolded woman bearing a broken staff, who allows the tablets of the law to droop in her arms, thereby symbolizing their obsolescence. Her alleged historical replacement, the Church, stood erect, triumphantly holding a cross and a chalice of grace.

The “valorized time” Mikhail Bakhtin described as typifying epic literature involves a special, valorized form of perceiving and depicting people and events. The key to this valorization is found in the use of language and imagery: “One may, and in fact one must, memorialize with artistic language only that which is worthy of being remembered, that which should be preserved in the memory of descendants.” An image, writes Bakhtin, “is created for descendants, and this image is projected onto their sublime and distant horizon. Contemporaneity for its own sake (that is to say, a contemporaneity that makes no claim on future memory) is molded in clay; contemporaneity for the future (for descendants) is molded in marble or bronze.”

Few images in the history of literature have the staying power of those stone tablets said to have borne letters etched by the finger of God. It is the valorized image rather than the semantic value of the words that has given this literary epic such longevity. Likewise, it is the very power of this visceral image that has managed to divert attention away from the obviously mundane character of the laws themselves, the very diversion that originally enabled the ironic valorization of the commonplace. The irony was diffused. The polemic became a creed. Like a betrothed who carries around letters from her beloved, Israel and the inheritors of Israel's spiritual legacy framed themselves as having once carried God's engraved message in a box. In a world dominated by ephemeral bits of data instantaneously floated across an electronic universe with the stroke of a key, I would imagine that words etched in stone symbolically constitute the very image of moral stability for which we all yearn. But what has been lost on the interpreters of the text is that the very authors who wrote of God engraving ten statutes of a covenant in stone, also allowed those stones to vanish from the narrative. The same religionists ready to place granite Decalogue monuments in our courthouses and at our schools fail to grasp the existential irony of their disappearance. The vanishing of these stones from history signals the author's profound sense of life's transience – a transience so inescapable that not even tablets etched by the divine could endure. In the end, the ephemeral word outlasts the stones.