



Exodus 20:1-21

Israel's obligations under the Covenant

The law which governed the life of the people of ancient Israel was seen by them to be basic to their very existence as a people. They considered it to be a gift to them from God, the author of life itself and the one who formed them into a nation. They saw themselves as being privileged to have it and they delighted in it as in a treasured gift.

Psalm 19:7-8

‘The law of YHWH is perfect,
reviving the soul.

The decrees of YHWH are sure,
making wise the simple.

The precepts of YHWH are right,
rejoicing the heart.

The commandment of YHWH is clear,
enlightening the eyes.’

- They had been slaves in Egypt, with no law to protect them, no rights. God heard their cry, liberated them from oppression, led them to freedom, and gave them a law, a way to live, which they believed would lead them to experience the fullness of a life in which the deepest desires of their heart would be realised.

- Among the many laws that regulated every aspect of their communal and personal lives, the ‘Ten Words’ (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13. 10:4) held a special place. They expressed in summary form the basic imperatives which they were to follow in their relations to God and to each other. They functioned as a kind of constitution of Israel, and the prophets used them as a basic reference point in their critique of the nation. Jesus himself lived by them and referred to them, as do the authors of the NT. For Jews and Christians alike they remain, still today, a basic rule of life.

- There are two accounts of the Ten Commandments in the Bible (Exodus 20:1-7 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21). They are almost identical – witnessing to the care with which ancient traditions were handed down through the centuries. The differences show that they knew their God was a living God to whom they had to keep listening. Israel placed its faith, not in the human words that gave expression to God's revelation, but in God himself who was constantly present in their history and who was constantly revealing his will to them in the events of their history and in the words of their prophets.

- The text is clear that there are ten words (see 34:28). It is not clear on how exactly the words are to be numbered.
- Since the time of Clement of Alexandria (died c.215AD) verses 1 to 6 have traditionally been considered to make up the first commandment. This is the system we are following.
- The conventional Jewish tradition is to count verse 1 as the first 'word' and verses 2 to 6 as the second word.
- others reckon verses 1-3 as the first word, and verses 4 to 6 as the second.

- The basic laws protecting life, family, and the right to whatever is needed to sustain these, can be found in ancient Near-East codes of law that pre-date Exodus.
- the code of Ur-Nammu from Sumer (c.2000BC)
the code of Eshnunna from Akkad (c.1900BC)
the code of Lipit-Ishtar from Sumer (c.1850BC)
the code of Hammurabi from Babylon (c.1700BC)

- The code found in the Book of Exodus goes beyond them in that it is concerned with motivation and intention and not only actions. But, more importantly, the laws regulating social behaviour are founded on a relationship with YHWH, the God of the Exodus.
- Social responsibilities flow from the covenant which God has made with his people. It is for this reason that the code begins with two commandments which regulate our behaviour in relation to God.

I. The First Commandment (Exodus 20:1-6)

God spoke all these words: I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or be enslaved by them; for I YHWH your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

- The importance of the first commandment is indicated by its comparative length and by its position in the code. It is the relationship which the community has with God that will ultimately determine the relationship which the members will have with each other. If we worship the wrong God they will fail to respect each other.

- The commandments begin, with an account of the historical redemption from slavery and oppression in Egypt. The God who is revealing his will to them, the God who is gracing them with the gift of his law, is the same God who heard their cry in Egypt and raised up Moses to liberate them. He is:
- ‘YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’(Exodus 34:6).

- We are not commanded to worship an abstract god. It is not a matter of managing to put the right name ['YHWH'] on any god we might choose to follow. When we worship 'god', we are to worship the one who liberated from slavery in Egypt, and no other.
- If we worship the God who hates oppression, we will not be tempted to oppress each other; if we make our first and ultimate concern the worship of YHWH, we will listen to his word and obey his commands. It is this truth which is at the heart of the Ten Commandments.

- The ultimate question is not: ‘Do you or do you not believe in and worship God?’;
- but rather: ‘Who is the God in whom you believe and whom you worship?’
- The Ten Words demand that it be YHWH: the God who hears the cry of the poor [Exodus 3:7; Psalm 22:24; 34:6; 69:33; 147:6; 149:4].

- The first commandment warns us against creating our own 'gods', only to be enslaved by them. 'Graven images' is an obvious example.
- More subtle are the ways condemned by the prophets: 'gods' like success, power, material advancement, independence, and pleasure.

- When the people of Israel asked: ‘Who is God?’, they were able to point to the Exodus. We who have come to know Jesus can point to him, and to that more catholic (‘universal’), and more complete liberation which he effected by his compassionate love. Just as all their images of ‘God’ had to be checked against the experience of the Exodus, so all our images must be checked against Jesus: his prayer, his faith, his life given in carrying out his mission of love

- The God of the Exodus and the God and Father of Jesus cannot be represented in the fixed forms of cult images. God cannot be contained within even the inspired words of Sacred Scripture or the infallible expressions of dogma. God remains mysteriously transcendent, and so we must remain always open to the surprise of God's 'word'.

- Faithful to what he has done in the Exodus and in Jesus, and listening humbly and obediently to his word spoken within the community of the faithful, we must remain always ready to journey on into the mystery of divine communion. We are not allowed to limit our attention to what is obvious. We are not allowed to be content with religious routine. We may not control the divine or make it predictable. We must not worship anything less than the real, living God: that is the message of the first commandment.

- Failure to obey the first commandment has bad effects on ourselves and others. What we do matters. We cannot pretend that it is otherwise. Neither does God pretend. The Sacred Scriptures make it clear that God does not inflict arbitrary evil on those who do not obey him, as though ‘divine punishment’ were an extra added on to punish the sinner. ‘Punishment’ is only the effects brought on by sin itself. God uses it to draw us to repentance, but if we are hard-hearted and obstinate in behaving unjustly, we cannot just wish away the evil results, and God, the truthful one, must declare things to be the way they are.

- If we remain obstinate and refuse to learn from the effects of our sinful behaviour, and if we die unrepentant, Jesus himself speaks of the eternal punishment of hell. This is not something that God imposes on the sinner. It is, as defined by the Catholic Catechism, ‘a state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed’(n.1033).

- At the same time, as the final words of the first commandment make clear, divine initiative is always loving. Those who 'hate' God, that is to say, those who do not allow God's creating and redeeming love to be effective in their lives, will end up destroying themselves and hurting others.
- However, those who 'love' God, that is to say those who say Yes to God's will and open themselves to God's grace and blessing, will experience life and their influence will go on for ever.

2. The Second Commandment (Exodus 20:7)

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of YHWH your God, for YHWH will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

The second commandment goes much further than ensuring that we refer to God in a polite way. It applies to everything that we do in God's name. The person who claims to be speaking for God, but whose words do not come from God, is breaking the second commandment. The person or institution that, in God's name, behaves in ways that are not consistent with the action of God in the Exodus or in Jesus, is breaking the second commandment. Anyone who would attempt, however subtly, to confine God within the limits of human words or customs is breaking the second commandment.

- When we reflect on all the injustices that have been done in God's name, and on all the imperfect images of God that have been imposed on people in God's name, we begin to realise how radical this second commandment is. We must be very careful when we call on God to support our teaching. Prophecy, theology, liturgy and prayer can be genuine and they can be false. They can be authentic expressions of genuine religious encounters with the living God, or they can be substitutes for such an encounter. The second commandment demands the utmost care of us when we speak or act in God's name.