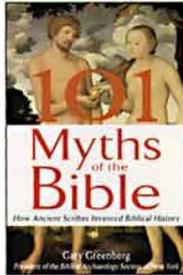


Myth 78: Moses Gave Israel the Ten Commandments

(NOTE: The following material is a draft of a chapter from 101 Myths of the Bible and may vary slightly from the published version.)



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The Myth: And God spake all these words, saying, I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

Thou shalt not kill.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. (Ex. 20:1-18.)

The Reality: The bible has several contradictory accounts of what laws the Israelites were given, how many they received, and where and when they got them. The traditional version of the Ten Commandments as given above was a late invention created no earlier than the seventh century BC.

The traditional view of how Israel received the Ten Commandments goes something like this. God verbally announced Ten Commandments to the people of Israel and they were later reduced to writing on stone tablets. Moses received the tablets on Mount Sinai and brought them down to the people. When he returned to the Israelites he saw the golden calf built by Aaron, became angry and smashed the stones. He returned to the mountain and obtained a new set of tablets. These he passed on to the people, placing them in the Ark of the Covenant for safekeeping. Thereafter, the Ten Commandments served as a sacred bond between the Israelites and the Hebrew god.

Unfortunately, this picture is pieced together from a number of threads that contain inconsistent claims and alternative scenarios. The bible integrates at least four different law codes within the story of the Ten Commandments, two of which contain similar versions of the traditional Ten Commandments, one of which contains a radically different version of the Ten Commandments, and one which contains over forty commandments, incorporating variations of the laws listed in the other three documents.

The Hebrew or Greek word translated as “commandment” actually means “word.” So, despite the rather verbose content of the Ten Commandments, originally, there should have been just “Ten Words” on the stone tablets.

The bible also disagrees as to when and where the Israelites received the stone tablets. In Exodus Moses brings the tablets to Israel during the first few months of the Exodus while camped by Mount Sinai. In Deuteronomy, Moses gives them the tablets forty years later, in the vicinity of Mount Horeb at the entranceway to the Promised Land.

The biblical history of the Ten Commandments begins with a show of smoke, thunder and lightning as God offers the Israelites a covenant. Follow my rules, he said, and I’ll give you a homeland in Canaan and drive out the present inhabitants. He then announced a set of ten commandments, the content of which appears in Ex. 20:1-17. This constitutes the traditional version of the Ten Commandments.

The Book of Deuteronomy provides a recap of the same scene and Deu. 5:6-21 sets forth a second version of God’s announced commandments. The two sets of commandments are nearly identical but for two important differences.

With regard to remembering the Sabbath, Deuteronomy states that the purpose of the commandment is to remind Israel that God liberated the Hebrews from servitude in Egypt. The Exodus version says that the purpose of the Sabbath is to remind Israel that God rested on the seventh day of Creation.

Another distinction between Exodus and Deuteronomy appears in the last commandment about the coveting of other property. The Exodus version reads:

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour’s. (Ex. 20:17.)

The Deuteronomy version reads:

Neither shalt thou desire thy neighbour’s wife, neither shalt thou covet thy neighbour’s house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is thy neighbour’s. (Deu. 5:21.)

In the first version, a neighbor's wife is considered part of the male's household property. In the second version, she is separate from the household property.

Despite the nearly identical language throughout the two texts, these two differences show disagreement over what was originally supposed to have been inscribed in stone and preserved for all to see and hear. From here on I will use the terms "Traditional Ten Commandments" or the "traditional version" when referring to either of these two texts. When one refers to the Ten Commandments, it is one of these two versions that is meant.

When God finished announcing the terms of the covenant, the people were frightened and asked Moses to talk with God on a one-to-one basis and leave them out of it "lest we die." Moses then went up on the mountain to talk to God and they had a long conversation during which the Lord set forth a list of well over forty commandments and perhaps more than sixty, depending upon how the sentences are punctuated and divided. (The full list appears in Ex. 21:1-23:26.) The list has the following preamble. "Now these are the judgments which thou shalt set before them (Ex. 21:1.)"

Although we need not look at the full substance of these "judgments," we should note that variations of all the Traditional Ten Commandments appear within this larger listing but the substance of the text and the sequence of appearance vary significantly from the traditional version. From here on I will refer to this collection of commandments as the Judgments.

At the end of this long conversation,

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do. And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD (Ex. 24:3-4.)

We have now arrived at the first written statement of God's law and they are not on stone tablets. The passage says that first Moses told the people "all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments." Then the people said they would follow the "words" and Moses then "wrote all the words of the Lord." While Moses first announces "words" and "judgments," the people agree to only the "words" and Moses writes down only the "words." Where are the Judgments?

Do the "words" and the "judgments" mean the same thing or does "words" refer to what God announced to the crowd and "judgments" to the long list of commandments given on the mountain? Since the people had already heard God's announcement and it frightened them, it hardly seemed necessary to repeat it, especially since the essence was already contained within the longer listing. Did Moses write down just the "words" announced by God to the crowd, just the "Judgments" that only Moses heard or both collections? Were "words" and "judgments" interchangeable concepts?

In context, Moses' action followed immediately after the private conversation on the mountain and one would expect his writing to contain the substance of that conversation. But, what we have here is an example of complicated biblical editing reflecting the interaction of two or more separate traditions.

God announced the commandments in Ex. 20, and at the end of that chapter the Lord gives instructions for building an altar. In the last verse of the chapter he says, "Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon."

The original source document containing those verses resumed at Ex. 24:1, which continues the discussion with a direction for Moses to

Come up unto the LORD, thou, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and worship ye afar off.

However, the “Judgments,” an alternative tradition about God’s commandments, also circulated, and a redactor inserted the list of “Judgments” beginning at Ex. 21:1, which interrupted the flow of the source story about God’s announcement of the Traditional Ten Commandments. The insertion of this list created confusion as to whether the narrative talked about the “words” in the announcement or the “judgments” in the inserted text.

After writing down whichever set of commandments he transcribed, Moses identified the writing as the “Book of the Covenant” and read it to the people (Ex. 24:7.) Did he really have to re-read what God had already told them in such an unforgettable manner, or did he have to read it to them because it contained the much longer collection of Judgments that only he heard?

After some ceremonial acceptance of the covenant, God invited Moses back up the mountain.

And the LORD said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach the (Ex. 24:12.)

In this passage we have the first reference to stone tablets. It says that they have already been written and implies but doesn’t precisely say that they contain both a “law” and “commandments,” an indication that they may contain something more than or other than the Traditional Ten Commandments.

Moses went back up the mountain but instead of receiving the indicated tablets, he had another long conversation with God, this time about the design of a sanctuary and an ark and the contents of the sanctuary and the dress of the priests and related matters (Ex. 24:16-31:17). Among the instructions was a direction that anyone who violates the Sabbath rest be put to death. After this lengthy set of instructions about how to properly worship the Lord, God finally handed over the tablets.

And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.

Moses has now received for the first time two stone tablets and they are called “tables of testimony” not “tables of commandments” or “Ten Commandments.” What is the table of testimony and does it contain anything different than the previously written Book of the Covenant? By implication, these should be the stone tablets that God invited Moses to receive on the mountain and which had already been written and which included both “a law and commandments.”

As Moses communed with God on the mountain above, Aaron built a Golden Calf on the ground below. When Moses returned and discovered what his brother had done, violating two of the new commandments that had been previously announced to the people, he angrily smashed the tablets. There follows various reactions to Israel’s sin, and then in Ex. 34 God instructs Moses, “Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest.”

Moses prepared the new tablets and returned before the Lord. In this second talk, God renewed the call for a covenant and said that if Israel followed the rules God would deliver Canaan to his people and drive out the enemies. This was essentially the same covenant made earlier. This repetition of the covenant is necessary because it is part of the agreement to follow the commandments and had to be included in the written version. It also means that the words that follow are the commandments that go with the covenant.

God followed up the renewal of the covenant with another set of commandments but they were very different, as we will see. First let's examine the concluding instruction.

And the LORD said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel. And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. (Ex. 34:27-28.)

For the first time the bible specifically refers to the "Ten Commandments" and says that Moses wrote them on the stone tablets. In the opening of this passage we were told that the tablets would contain the very words that were on the broken tablets. Then follows the new set of commandments and a concluding statement that these are the Ten Commandments. What do they say? (The numbers in front of each paragraph are intended to make it easier to separate out the commandments; they are not in the bible. The essential portion of each commandment is in boldface.)

1. Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: **For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD**, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God:

2. Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. **Thou shalt make thee no molten gods.**

3. **The feast of unleavened bread shalt thou keep.** Seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, as I commanded thee, in the time of the month Abib: for in the month Abib thou camest out from Egypt.

4. All that openeth the matrix is mine; and every firstling among thy cattle, whether ox or sheep, that is male. But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb: and if thou redeem him not, then shalt thou break his neck. **All the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem.** And none shall appear before me empty.

5. Six days thou shalt work, but **on the seventh day thou shalt rest:** in earing time and in harvest thou shalt rest.

6. **And thou shalt observe the feast of weeks,** of the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end.

7. **Thrice in the year shall all your menchildren appear before the Lord GOD,** the God of Israel. For I will cast out the nations before thee, and enlarge thy borders: neither

shall any man desire thy land, when thou shalt go up to appear before the LORD thy God thrice in the year.

8. Thou shalt not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven; neither shall the sacrifice of the feast of the passover be left unto the morning.

9. The first of the first fruits of thy land thou shalt bring unto the house of the LORD thy God.

10. Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk. (Ex. 34:12-26.)

These then, at least according to the bible, are the true Ten Commandments, and they differ radically from the commandments verbally announced in Ex. 20 and Deu. 5. From here on I will refer to this new set of commandments as the Ritual Ten Commandments. The text says that these are what were on the first set of stone tablets. The Judgments include all the substance of the Ritual Ten Commandments but, as with the Traditional Ten Commandments, use very different language and have a different sequence.

Only three of the Ritual Commandments exhibit any similarity to the Traditional Commandments. Although, both ban the worship of other gods, in the Ritual version the Israelites are specifically commanded to destroy the religious icons of the other peoples. Both ban the making of graven images, but the Ritual version is less restrictive as to the kinds of images that are banned. And finally, both versions require obedience to the Sabbath, but the Ritual version extends it to some other holiday occasions also.

Unlike the two Traditional Versions of the Ten Commandments, each of which gives a different explanation for the Sabbath, the Ritual Ten Commandments provide no explanation at all. But in the Judgments, a very different explanation appears.

“Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.” (Ex. 23:12.)

This view recognizes that overworked cattle and servants won't be as productive as they could be and if they aren't productive the Lord won't be given his due. This seems to be the more logical and more likely origin of the Sabbath law.

The common touch-point between the Traditional and Ritual versions of the Ten Commandments concerns the rules of behavior towards God. They differ in that the Traditional Version prohibits wrongful behavior towards other people while the Ritual Version concentrates solely on the religious principles of worshipping god.

The viewpoint expressed within the Ritual Ten Commandments makes more sense as the basis of a religious covenant than does the Traditional Ten Commandments. The restrictions on immoral behavior towards others were commonplace and widespread in ancient society. Everybody generally recognized that killing and stealing and lying were bad. Why would God need to impose those conditions as the basis of a special covenant? As all the versions show, God was a jealous being, and any covenant he was likely to make would be based on how the people treated him, not how they treated other people.

The instruction in the Ritual Ten Commandments to “destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves” exhibits a strong martial attitude on the part of its proponents. Its

placement in the context of the golden calf story provides a good clue as to which faction authored the text.

We saw in a previous chapter that the Golden Calf story was a myth created by a Levite faction that opposed both the special authority of the Aaronites and the split of the northern kingdom from Judah. In the Golden Calf story, the Levites (from all branches) slaughtered over 3,000 violators of God's commandments. This militaristic attribute of the priestly Levites suggests that the same Levite group that invented the Golden Calf story put forth the Ritual Ten Commandments with its martial religious nature. This dates the origin of the Ritual Ten Commandments to after the breakup of the monarchy.

Since the Golden Calf story was a fiction, the breaking of the tablets in reaction was also a fiction. Prior to the invention of the Ritual Ten Commandments there would have been an earlier set of laws handed down on stone but it had been lost. The Levites invented a story about a new set of stone tablets in order to substitute their set of rituals for the rival collection. After this direct reference to the Ritual Ten Commandments as "The Ten Commandments," the expression "Ten Commandments" appears only twice more in the bible, both times in Deuteronomy.

Deu. 4:13 says that the Ten Commandments were written on two tables of stone, but it doesn't identify their contents. The mention precedes the subsequent listing of the Deuteronomy version of the Traditional Ten Commandments. Deu. 10:3-4 says,

And I made an ark of shittim wood, and hewed two tables of stone like unto the first, and went up into the mount, having the two tables in mine hand. And he wrote on the tables, according to the first writing, the ten commandments, which the LORD spake unto you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly: and the LORD gave them unto me.

This passage refers specifically to the second set of tablets as containing the Ten Commandments, although it says that God wrote them instead of Moses. Since the Deuteronomy text also introduces these tablets after the Golden Calf incident, it must have been written after the invention of the Ritual Ten Commandments and offered as a replacement.

Deu. 5:22, however, which follows immediately after the list of the Traditional Ten Commandments, says,

These words the LORD spake unto all your assembly in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice: and he added no more. And he wrote them in two tables of stone, and delivered them unto me.

The phrase, "and he added no more" shows a clear concern that somewhere the tradition developed that there were more than Ten Commandments. In Exodus when Moses was invited up to receive the written tablets, they were to contain "law and commandments." Clearly, the author of Deuteronomy recognized an alternative tradition of a larger set of commandments than the traditional ten. This may have been the list of Judgments that contained both the Traditional Ten Commandments and the Ritual Ten Commandments. Alternatively, he may have been concerned that some people would consider the Ritual Ten Commandments to be in addition to the Traditional Ten Commandments and wanted to make sure that only the author's version would be accepted.

That the Traditional Ten Commandments, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, were of late origin is evident from the biblical account of how King Josiah, who ruled from 639-609 BC, discovered the “Law of Moses.”

The bible says that prior to Josiah’s administration, not only had a written copy of the “Law” disappeared from the kingdom, but also nobody seemed to know what it was nor was it being followed. According to 2 Ki. 22:8-13, the high priest of the temple, Hilkiah, found the text somewhere in the temple and he gave it to a scribe named Shaphan. The scribe in turn brought it to King Josiah and they read it together. To their amazement they found that they were in violation of the laws handed down by Moses and Josiah became so upset he rent his clothes, fearing that God would be angry at Judah.

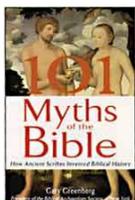
But for his good fortune in discovering a copy of the “Law” just laying around in the temple, lost for ages, the Hebrews would have continued to live in sin. Based on this newly found manuscript Josiah launched a series of religious reforms intended to bring back the Law of Moses. His priests and scribes probably wrote Deuteronomy.

One wonders how anything as simple as a handful of commandments forming a sacred bond between God and the nation could be so easily forgotten and lost, especially if they were written on stone. The book of law that was found, by the way, appears to have been a scroll rather than a stone tablet, and, obviously, it wasn’t found in the Ark of the Covenant, where Moses supposedly placed it for safekeeping.

Whatever the previous religious practices and political schisms, the Traditional Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy emerged for the first time no earlier than Josiah’s reign. The Exodus version must have been written later, otherwise Josiah would have known about it and perhaps even commented in some manner on the differences between them.

In summary, the bible presents four different legal codes, each with a claim that it was the original version of God’s covenant with Israel. The only version specifically and clearly identified in the bible as the Ten Commandments is the Ritual version, which dates to sometime after Israel and Judah split. Both versions of the Traditional Ten Commandments, which Moses supposedly gave Israel in the wilderness, date to after the Ritual Ten Commandments and no earlier than the reign of Josiah.

Finally, we have a fourth version known as the Judgments, encompassing both the Traditional and Ritual versions of the Ten Commandments along with many other legal obligations. Its date is unknown but its language differs considerably from the other three texts. If any of the other three borrowed from that version, one would expect similar language and the same sequence of laws, but neither is the case. That this version was inserted into the middle of one of the traditional versions suggests that it was a late but independent compilation of common legal precepts that had found a large and popular audience.



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