

Our Identity

Exodus 20:1-7 (March 7, 2021)

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Then God spoke all these words: 2I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3you shall have no other gods before me. 4You 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. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord 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, 6but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Historical Context

The Ten Commandments or The Decalogue is largely regarded by some scholars as the preamble to a covenant (Hebrew: berit) or binding treaty between the Israelites and God. Others regard the Ten Commandments more as a moral code than a legal code. Legal codes often contain a list of consequences or punishments for violating any of the statutes or codes in “if/then” or “casuistic” terms. However, The Decalogue does not impose such conditions on the Israelites because its religious and moral qualities take for granted that these are “apodictic” or beyond dispute.

Theme: Our Identity

The Ten Commandments are not primarily a set of universal rules, a binding list of dos and don'ts for all people at all times and all places. They don't seek to summarize all the world's wisdom on two stone tablets. To be sure, the Ten Commandments certainly enunciate basic morals that all kinds of people would embrace, but they do not seek to establish an unchanging sense of law and order in a world that is constantly in flux.

The story of the Ten Commandments in Exodus is less about proper behavior than it is about identity. Who are we? What is our relationship to God? What is our relationship to one another? We tend to separate these foundational questions, compartmentalizing each to a separate realm of reflection, but the narrative in Exodus conjoins these queries.

The primary orientation of the Ten Commandments is not to serve as guides for good behavior, for their simplicity masks the complexity of moral and theological reflection. The Ten Commandments are not mere symbols either.

Instead, the Ten Commandments are primarily about the identity of God, the character of God's followers, and our relationships to one another. Our identity, our theology, and our relationships are all inter-mixed in a set of commandments we may find indispensable but also—if we are honest—incredibly difficult to understand and embrace fully.