

# The Ten Commandments, Part 1: Non-Imperative Clauses

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## Text of the Ten Commandments

In this paper I discuss a neglected aspect of the literary structure of the Ten Commandments in Exod 20:1-17. This brief law code is now quoted.

### Text Exhibit 1 The Text of the Ten Commandments

#### First Four Commands

- #1 "(2) I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.  
"(3) You shall have no other gods before me.
- #2 "(4) You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. (5) You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (6) but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments.
- #3 "(7) You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
- #4 "(8) Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. (9) Six days you shall labor and do all your work, (10) but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. (11) For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

#### Last Six Commands

- #5 "(12) Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.
- #6 "(13) You shall not murder.
- #7 "(14) You shall not commit adultery.
- #8 "(15) You shall not steal.
- #9 "(16) You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

#10 "(17) You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

The Ten Commandments get their name from the fact that in them God presents a number of rules for right thought and behavior, both in regard to our relationship with Him (commands 1-4) and in regard to our relationship with other people (commands 5-10). But there are some clauses in the law that contain explanations instead of commands. The two types of clauses--some containing commands and some containing explanations--are now separated from each other to illustrate their differences. In text exhibit 2 only imperative clauses are quoted.

Text Exhibit 2  
Imperative Clauses in the  
Ten Commandments

First Four Commands

- #1 "(3) You shall have no other gods before me.
- #2 "(4) You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. (5) You shall not bow down to them or worship them; . . .
- #3 "(7) You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, . . .
- #4 "(8) Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. (9) Six days you shall labor and do all your work, (10) but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.

Last Six Commands

- #5 "(12) Honor your father and your mother, . . .
- #6 "(13) You shall not murder.
- #7 "(14) You shall not commit adultery.
- #8 "(15) You shall not steal.
- #9 "(16) You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- #10 "(17) You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

It is the other clauses--those which are not imperative in a grammatical sense, but indicative--that are of special interest in the present paper. Because they convey explanatory information these non-imperative clauses may be considered didactic, i.e., they have a teaching function. The two terms "didactic" and "non-imperative" are used interchangeably below. In text exhibit 3 only the non-imperative clauses in the Ten Commandments are quoted.

Text Exhibit 3  
Non-Imperative Clauses in  
the Ten Commandments

First Four Commands

- #1 "(2) I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
- #2 ". . . for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (6) but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments.
- #3 ". . . for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
- #4 "(11) For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Last Six Commands

- #5 ". . . so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

## Literary Structure of the Ten Commandments

### Arrangement of clauses

It is generally the case that explanatory material occurs within the first table of the law (the first six commands) and is absent from the second. Also, where explanatory clauses do occur, it is generally the case that they follow the material they explain rather than preceding it. The initially expected pattern of imperative and non-imperative clauses is that shown in table 1.

But the abstract patterns illustrated in table 1 are not precisely what we find in the text. The theme is as given, but there are variations on it and these variations are instructive. See table 2.

Table 1  
Expected Pattern of Imperative  
and Didactic Clauses

Comm #	First Clause	Second Clause
First Four		
1	Imperative	Didactic
2	Imperative	Didactic
3	Imperative	Didactic
4	Imperative	Didactic
Last six		
5	Imperative	
6	Imperative	
7	Imperative	
8	Imperative	
9	Imperative	
10	Imperative	

Table 2  
Actual Pattern of Imperative  
and Didactic Clauses

Comm #	First Clause	Second Clause
First Four		
1	Didactic	Imperative
2	Imperative	Didactic
3	Imperative	Didactic
4	Imperative	Didactic
Last six		
5	Imperative	Didactic
6	Imperative	
7	Imperative	
8	Imperative	
9	Imperative	
10	Imperative	

So far I have pointed out that didactic clauses occur within the law and that they do not occur in a random manner, but follow a clearly defined pattern. There are exceptions to the pattern. I now suggest that the exceptions do not occur randomly either.

The differences between tables 1 and 2 (above) are found in the first commandment and the fifth, i.e., in the first command of the group dealing with our relationship to God and the first command of the group dealing with our relationship to man. Both parts of the law begin with an unexpected arrangement of clauses.

In the first case, a didactic clause is expected to occur, but only after the command that it clarifies. Instead it precedes that command. In the second case, we would not expect a didactic clause to occur at all, but one does. In both cases the appearance of explanatory material in a location other than where we might initially have expected it has the effect of making that clause more prominent than it would have been otherwise. The first commandment

does not begin with its imperative clause (vs. 3), but with its didactic clause (vs. 2). And the fifth commandment does not begin with an imperative clause alone, but with a command accompanied by an explanation.

Where do the Ten Commandments begin?

*Placement of didactic clauses.* The present analysis helps to answer a question on which there is a surprising amount of disagreement. Translations which present their text in paragraph form as well as verses have a number of different options. They can: (a) begin a paragraph at vs. 3 ("You shall have no other gods before me"),<sup>1</sup> (b) begin a paragraph at vs. 2 ("I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery"),<sup>2</sup> or (c) lump vss. 1-3 together as part of a larger section and take no position on how the text should be divided.<sup>3</sup> At issue is the question of whether vs. 2 is or is not part of the first commandment.<sup>4</sup>

Verse 1 ("And God spoke all these words:") is a general preamble to the law as a whole. If this is the case, and if vs. 2 is also taken to be a general preamble, then the law has two of them. At the same time, under such a model, the first commandment lacks an explanatory clause. In my view these two facts are related and should be approached together. Instead of arguing that an unexpected second introduction occurs just before the first commandment and that at the same time the didactic clause expected in that position is missing, the extra introduction should be recognized as the missing explanation. Thus, the first commandment does unequivocally begin with vs. 2 and it becomes possible to capture, in a systematic way, the important generalizations that the first table tends to have explanatory clauses, that the second table does not tend have them, and that where a difference from this norm occurs--in the first commandment of both tables--it is in the direction of making explanatory material more prominent than would otherwise have been the case.<sup>5</sup>

*Placement of the title "the Lord, your God."* Another point of structure that supports the present analysis has to do with the phrase "the Lord, your God," which occurs in commandments 1 through 5, i.e., in all and only those commandments that, in my view, contain a didactic clause. It does not always occur within the same type of clause, however. See table 3.

Table 3  
Placement of the Title  
"The Lord, Your God"

Comm #	Type of Clause	Verse
1	Didactic	2
2	Didactic	5
3	Imperative	7
4	Imperative	10
5	Didactic	12

Within any given commandment the question of where the title "the Lord, your God" appears does not seem to matter. Its occurrences are about equally divided between the two clause types. But in the case of the first commandment the placement of this expression is significant. If vs. 2 is not a part of the first commandment, then the title "the Lord, your God" does not occur in the first commandment, because it appears outside that commandment's

imperative clause. I suggest that what has been said about the placement of clause types combined now with the placement of the divine title "the Lord, your God" gives strong supporting evidence that the first of the Ten Commandments contains vs. 2, i.e., that it both has and begins with a didactic or non-imperative clause.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

The amount of explanatory material in the law is considerable. There are 172 words in the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments, seventy-seven of which occur in indicative clauses--where words bound by *maqṣēp* are counted separately. Counting in this way indicative material makes up 44.8% (77/172) of the total. As regards *maqṣēp*, there are thirty-one examples in all and sixteen (51.6%) in indicative clauses. If words bound by *maqṣēp* are counted jointly there are 141 word units in all, with sixty-two examples in indicative clauses. The method is slightly different but the results are the same. Indicative material still accounts for 44.0% (62/141) of the total when *maqṣēp* is counted. The point to notice is that in either case virtually half of the bulk of the Ten Commandment law consists of explanatory clauses rather than commands.

The Giver of the law obviously wanted to be obeyed. This much is clear from the impressive manner in which the Ten Commandments were given. But just as obviously He wanted to be understood. When the structural patterns of the narrative are considered, as well as the number of words devoted to explanatory material, it is clear that God not only included explanations in the law, but devoted as much as half of His attention to clauses dealing with them, and by the structure of the resulting document made such clauses prominent as He did so. No discussion of the law is complete without taking these facts into account. But the question remains why a Being with such power to command would bother explaining His requirements in this way.

One does not explain in a situation where the good will of the other party is irrelevant. A person explains when he or she wants to maintain a relationship. The fact that God made so obvious an attempt to be understood by those who would later study His law forcefully implies that He wants to enter or maintain a relationship with them. The law does not portray God as being distant from mankind, but the reverse.

The above claim is supported by one of the most obvious and easily overlooked facts about Israel's experience at Sinai--i.e., that God came down onto the mountain. "The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain" (Exod 19:20). In coming down onto the mountain God met His people where they were. He did not summon them to meet Him where He was. They could not have done this. He took their inabilities and limitations into account when He met with them. In reading the story of Exod 19:16-25 we tend to notice that there was thunder and lightning and forget that what caused these things was God's act of coming down to meet His people where they were, instead of demanding--unreasonably--that they come to Him.

For over a thousand years God continued to come to His people, but Israel feared Him in a negative sense, or hated Him, or ignored Him. All too few individuals responded on the level that He desired. And so through Jeremiah God cries out,

"What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves." (Jer 2:5)

The same message had been delivered by earlier prophets as well. For example, Hosea quotes God as saying,

"When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved." (Hos 9:10)

At the time Hosea wrote, things had gotten so bad as to be almost irreversible. But when God considers what the implications are that must follow from His people's actions, He recoils from the thought in a well-known passage:

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." (Hos 11:8)

Recall that Admah and Zeboiim were two of the five cities in the plain, which were destroyed by fire along with Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>7</sup> The imagery involved in this poetic reference to a historical event is one of final destruction, i.e., final separation. It is this that God finds so repugnant in the verse just quoted. And yet separation must occur unless Israel would agree to return. In the final event Israel did not return and its people were given up, but this is not what God had in mind for them.

Whenever we deal with God we underestimate Him. A Being so expansive must always be imperfectly understood. But in the law there is evidence that the infinite God has a genuine need for this very thing--to be understood. I have used the word in two senses and a distinction must be made between them. Needing to be understood is not the same thing as needing to be comprehended. Being understood carries with it the idea of a relationship, while comprehension alone could be quite cold and impersonal. Throughout the Old Testament God pursued His people, and in the process stooped to assume the role of an offended Lover. Divine humility was not first expressed when Christ took human flesh and became a man. The same Being, who has always been one with the Father, exhibited that same trait of character for centuries by patiently pursuing His thankless and rebellious people.

God does not need "temples built by hands" (Acts 17:24), because He Himself is the Maker of all things, but He does have a need that only we can supply. It is for this reason that He so consistently attempted to be close to His people in the Old Testament and this is also one reason for the incarnation. Christ came, in part, to be near His people. But a one-sided desire is a barren thing. And so He attempts to create a similar desire for closeness within us. God does not force His presence on anyone, but He has clearly taken the initiative.

If the law were ever to serve as an accurate revelation of God's character, people would have to realize that its meaning was broader and more inclusive than avoiding evil actions. There must be a positive principle of benevolence from which not doing bad things would follow naturally. It is one of the deeper lessons of the law that God, as it were, has mastered the lesson He Himself is trying to teach, and that His love and concern for us are an abiding principle from which all His dealings with us follow naturally.<sup>8</sup> Here is the one point, above all others, that we should learn from the law and from Scripture generally--that God is benevolent,

that He desires our good, that He does not have to be persuaded to love us, that it is part of His being to do so.

It was in order to clarify this point that God, at a later time, would reach out to mankind in Christ--not in a form that would frighten us and thereby instill the distance He was trying to remove--but as a man, to illustrate in a tangible way what words had shown themselves unable to explain. While it can never be fully comprehended, Christ's act of meeting us where we are cannot be misunderstood without intelligently choosing to do so. In Christ God has made His point. In the next issue of *Historicism* I discuss the New Testament sequel to Sinai.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Reprint revised 9/6/87.

<sup>1</sup>Versions currently available to me which divide the text into paragraphs and which place a paragraph break at vs. 3 are the Jerusalem Bible, Living Bible, Moffat, New English Bible, New International Version, New King James Version, Revised Standard Version, Revised Version (1901), Today's English Version, Today's French Version (La Bible en Francais Courant), and a Norwegian version completed in 1978.

<sup>2</sup>The only version in my library which places vss. 2-3 in a separate paragraph by themselves is the 1942 German translation, *Die heilige Schrift*, published by the Council of Churches in the canton of Zürich (der Kirchenrat des Kantons Zürich).

<sup>3</sup>Versions which do not divide the text into paragraphs are not listed here. The Modern Language Bible and a Dutch version of 1951 do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about how the translators thought the text of Exod 20:1-3 should be divided. It is interesting to notice that the Jewish Publication Society version of 1917 breaks at vs. 2 and again at vs. 3, with no further break until after vs. 6. Thus, vs. 3 is made part of the second commandment, which deals with idolatry, and vs. 2 stands alone as the first commandment.

<sup>4</sup>At issue in the question of whether or not vs. 2 is part of the first commandment is the much broader question of whether the ten commandment law is only intended for use by the nation that God led out of Egypt. If vs. 2 is a general introduction to the entire law, it could be argued that the whole law is made applicable or inapplicable by the historical facts referred to in the introductory verse. Thus, because only Israel was set free from Egypt, only Israel was placed obligation to keep the law. If the literary analysis implied by this argument were valid, which is an assumption I do not accept, the argument itself would still be open to serious challenges. Is it the case that Yahweh is only a Savior for Israel? Is there any other group of people to whom that same God extends the same hope of salvation? (See Matt 23:37; 1 Cor 10:4; Eph 4:4-6.) Is it the case that an invitation to share God's gracious way of thinking and acting is bondage? Paul writes that "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom 8:7), so the answer to this last question might be Yes. But that fact tells us more about ourselves than about God. It is precisely because the unconverted heart with which we are all born has an ingrained hostility toward God that an invitation to change becomes necessary. If the human heart were naturally inclined toward God, why should Paul write in another place that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19)? The alternative to reconciliation is separation, which, because God loves us, He finds unacceptable.

<sup>5</sup>In Exod 20 God's act of freeing Israel from slavery is given as the reason why no other god must be worshiped other than the Lord. When the law is repeated in Deut 5 God's freeing of Israel is given as the reason why the seventh-day Sabbath must be kept holy. I submit that the first commandment of the law is still in force for Christians today. It is not a prerogative of any



Christian to chose a god other than the Lord. That would be idolatry, as most exegetes would agree. If this is the case, i.e., if Christians must worship only the Lord because He is the God who led the ancient people of Israel out of Egypt (Exod 20:2), it seems reasonable for those same Christians to worship God on the Sabbath because He led Israel out of Egypt (Deut 5:15). How much more reasonable, then, to worship God on the Sabbath because He created the world (Exod 20:11). If the fact that Yahweh acted in history as Israel's Savior does not unfit Him for worship by Christians then it should not disqualify the seventh-day Sabbath as a day of worship for Christians. The two propositions stand or fall together.

<sup>6</sup>Two other blocs of text that are repeated within the law are the heaven, earth, and sea clause of the second commandment ("You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below," Exod 20:4) and the fourth ("For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them," vs. 11), and the list of relationships in the fourth commandment ("On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates," vs. 10) and the tenth ("You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor," vs. 17).

<sup>7</sup>See Gen 14:2, where Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela (or Zoar) are all mentioned together.

<sup>8</sup>It is my considered opinion that, while this is one of the first things we are taught about God (as in the song that says, "Jesus loves me, this I know"), it is one of the last ones we really learn. To have a settled conviction that, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, God loves us and is seeking our good by what he allows to come upon us is the most profound level of Christian maturity. Here is the faith that Christ displayed when Satan questioned whether God would allow His Son to be treated as He, to all appearances, was in fact being treated in the wilderness--alone and half dead from hunger. Christ had a faith in His Father that was stronger than death. Such things are "for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:14).