

OUT-MODED TEN COMMANDMENTS SEEN IN NEW LIGHT

The Ten Commandments have gone out of style for a lot of folks. People who get turned off by a do's-and-don'ts kind of religion can just dismiss them as outmode. "Don't make any graven images" or "Don't covet your neighbor's ox" seem about as pointless as New York's dog litter law.

So a fresh look is called for. If you check out the Ten Commandments against their background you'll find they're surprisingly relevant, for they manage to touch on just about every important aspect of life.

But first they have to be read against their background in the life of the ancient people of Israel. The story goes like this: Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt, and traveled with them toward the tip of the Sinai Peninsula.

While they camped at the foot of the mountain, Moses climbed up the rocks and there received much of the legal code which was to govern the Israelites for centuries.

The list of what has come to be known as the Ten Commandments is found twice in the Jewish scriptures, at Exodus 20:1-17 and at Deuteronomy 5:6-21.

The catalog includes prohibitions against having other gods, manufacturing or worshiping idols, misusing the divine name, profaning the Sabbath day, dishonoring one's parent, murdering, committing adultery, stealing, committing perjury, and coveting a neighbor's possessions.

Notice that the texts do not number these command. In fact, a careful count will turn up at least a dozen specific injunctions, followed by paragraphs and paragraphs of additional statutes. So in order to total the traditional ten, most religious groups resort to some pick-and-choose scheme.

Some count the orders not to have other god and not to take graven images as two separate commands; then they combine the two injunctions against coveting into one.

Other groups combine the prohibitions against other gods and graven images into one command, and separate the anti-coveting warnings into two. In either case the total rounds off to ten, hence, the Ten Commandments.

But the most revealing background insight is *the form* in which the commandments are presented in the Bible. They are not offered as a bald legal code. Rather, they are included within a treaty arrangement. And such treaties or covenants weren't anything new.

Historians of the ancient Near East have uncovered dozens of such treaties. There were international treaties which guaranteed cooperation between rival states.

There were commercial agreements between buyers, sellers, and shippers. There were intra-mural covenants which spelled out the relationship between a ruler and his people.

That last kind, the ruler-and-people covenant, looked like this: It would start off by naming the king and his accomplishments.

Then would come a list of what his subjects were to do in response—pay their taxes, serve in the army, and so forth.

The treaty would close with a list of witnesses, a series of blessings for those who kept the treaty and curses for those who broke it, and a final oath.

This looks suspiciously like the form in which the Ten Commandments are found. It starts out by naming the Lord God and his premier accomplishment: He "brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Then comes the list of the people's responsibilities: "You shall do this, and do that," and so on.

Later chapters of Exodus and Deuteronomy tell how this covenant was witnessed and ratified by the people and how they acted out the traditional blessings and curses.

So if you have been thinking of the commandments as a nit-picky list of do's and don'ts, think again. For it wasn't a case of the Israelites having to conform to a list of legal stipulations in order to qualify as God's people.

The logic was reversed: Because God had made them his people, they were challenged to live up to his catalog of minimum objectives.

So much for the background discussion. Also check out the uncanny way these commandments have of touching on just about every dimension of life.

The first few deal with your worship life, the forum of your ultimate beliefs. Then come some which touch on your family life, your physical health, your sex life, your property, and even the way you talk about people.

Finally come the anti-coveting commands which even analyze your inner thoughts!

The upshot of all this is that the Ten Commandments aren't quite as outmoded as some people think. On the one hand, they were designed to be a way in which a struggling

people could respond to the God they believed had rescued them.

On the other hand, they have a nifty way of opening up every area of life for that kind of response.

In other words, the Ten Commandments aren't for hemming people in. They're for giving sensitive folks a chance to be responsible.

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