24. The Decalogue
Exod 20

Exod 20 is the most important piece of legislation in the Bible. It mostly derives not from Hebrew, but from Canaanite, practice.

It is an interpolation.[1] Here it is in context, with key phrases **emphasized**:

[**Exod 19:16**] And it came to pass on the third day . . .that there were **thunders** and lightnings, and a thick **cloud** upon the mount, and the voice of a **trumpet** exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled .[17] And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the nether part of the mount. [18] And mount Sinai, the whole of it, **smoked**, because Yahweh descended upon it in **fire**; and the **smoke** thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount **quaked** greatly. [19] And when the voice of the **trumpet** waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice. [20] And Yahweh came down upon mount Sinai, to the top of the mount, and Yahweh **called Moses** to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. . . . [23] And Moses said unto Yahweh, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai, for thou didst charge us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it. [24] And Yahweh said unto him, Go, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou and Aaron with thee; but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto Yahweh, lest he break forth upon them. [25] So Moses went down unto the people, and told them.

> [**20:1**] *And god spake all these words, saying, [2] I am Yahweh, thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. [3] Thou shalt have no other gods before me. [4] Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any likeness . . . [17] Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.*

[18] And all the people perceived the **thunderings**, and the **lightnings**, and the voice of the **trumpet**, and the mountain **smoking**; and when the people saw it, they trembled, and stood afar off. [19] And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear, but **let not God speak with us**, lest we die.[20] And Moses said unto the people, Fear not, for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before you, that ye sin not. [21] And the people stood **afar off**, and **Moses drew near** unto the thick **darkness** where God was.

The passages on both sides are *consecutive*, as the emphasized phrases show: they do not appear in the Decalogue portion of the chapter. Lack of continuity between a passage and its neighbors is the classic evidence for interpolation.

---

[1]Thus McNeile (1917) 114, "must have been inserted;" Rylaarsdam (1952) 842, "give the impression of having been inserted;" Noth (1959; tr 1962) "loosely joined to the. . . theophany;" Stalker (1962) 227, "its insertion here breaks the clear original connection between 19:17 and 20:18;" Brueggemann (1994) 839, "Originally not connected to the theophany."

But when? It is absent in the first Exodus Code (Exod 21-31), but had appeared by the time of the Tabernacle passage (Exod 33-40), which in 34:28 has Moses writing the "ten commandments" he had received from Yahweh. Then it was added to the First Code *before* the Tabernacle section was written, and the sequence is:

Exod 20-31 > *Exod 20:1-17 (Decalogue) > Exod 33-40

Yahweh's words to Moses on the mountain, as quoted in Exod 34, allude only to the God parts: the First (no other gods, 20:3), Third (no images, 20:4-7, perhaps referring to the golden calf episode in Exod 32), and Fourth ("remember the Sabbath," 20:8). For the *ethical* prescriptions of the Decalogue, we must go to Exodus 20.

Antecedent. There is no credible trace of an earlier source. Nine of the ten rules can be found in Lev 19:9-18, but not in Exodus order, and mixed with material from Exod 21-23, the Covenant Code. Leviticus is thus secondary.[2] Like the second Exodus Festival code, the Lev 17-27 Holiness Code is late within Leviticus; it seems to be adding something that originated elsewhere. Bottom line: we do not know where the Decalogue came from.

Character. The last six Decalogue rules are briefly stated; the first four, the God four, are *argued*. The Exodus Decalogue may then be a Yahweh takeover of an earlier Canaanite six-item civil code.[3] Several late Biblical passages show an ethical rather than a sacrificial sense,[4] implying that ethics itself is late. But perhaps ethics was always there, as the mutual understanding of a community.

If so, what were the rules of that community? They protect four things:
  • The family (#5, honor father and mother; #7, do not commit adultery)
  • Life (#6, do not kill)
  • Property (#8, do not steal, #10, do not covet)
  • Legal due process (#9, do not bear false witness)
The family, the basic structure in all societies, is here safeguarded vertically (obedience of sons) and laterally (fidelity in marriage). Existence is peaceful, with security of persons (do not kill) and property (do not steal, do not covet). Judgements are rendered, not by parents, but by judges; in the simplest form, the judges would be clan or community elders (do not bear false witness).

Every society consists largely of an understanding *not to do* certain things. The above is not a bad attempt at a basic list of things not to do.[5]

---

[2]See Wenham **Leviticus** 262-264, and for a further suggestion, §29.

[3]This possibility is hinted at in Tappy **Lineage** 175, "This study treats the latter half of the Decalogue (Exod 20:12-17 / Deut 5:16-21) as a vestige of old lineage law . . ."

[4]For seven such passages, see §70.

[5]Its importance was widely recognized. Says Jesus in Mark 10:19, "Thou knowest the commandments: Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor thy father and mother."

Exodus and Deuteronomy

The Decalogue recurs in Deuteronomy 5, at first verbatim. Then there are variations, which give more place to the servant, and emphasize the original servant status of those who had been in Egypt:

Exodus 20	*Deuteronomy 5*

[7] Thou shalt not take the name of Yahweh thy God in vain; for Yahweh will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Remember   **Observe**

[8] The Sabbath day, to keep it holy. [9] Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work; [10] but the seventh day is a sabbath unto Yahweh thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor

thine ox, nor thine ass,
thy cattle   **nor any of thy cattle,**
nor the stranger that is within thy gates, [11]

that thy man-servant and thy
maid-servant may rest as well
as thou.

for in six days Yahweh made heaven   **And thou shalt remember that**
and earth, the sea, and all that in   **thou wast a servant in the land,**
them is, and rested the seventh day;   **and Yahweh thy God brought thee**
therefore Yahweh blessed the   **out thence by a mighty hand and by**
seventh day and hallowed it.[6]   **an outstretched arm, therefore**
Yahweh thy God commanded thee
to keep the sabbath day.

[12] Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which Yahweh thy God giveth thee. [13] Thou shalt not kill. [14] Thou shalt not[7] commit adultery. [15] Thou shalt not steal. [16] Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neiághbor. [17] Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's

house, **thou shalt not covet**   **wife**, **neither shalt thou desire**
thy neighbor's

wife,   **house**, **his field,**
nor[8] his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.

———————•••••———————

In Deuteronomy, besides these changes, the Decalogue becomes the ground plan for the reformulation of all earlier laws (§36). In that role, it is no longer a *statement* of law; it becomes something more like a *philosophy* of law.

Such was the long-term influence of this voice from the rural side of things: the Canaanite side of things.

---

[6]Note the contrast: Exodus alludes to the creation in seven days, alluding to Gen 1; Deuteronomy notes God's power in bringing the people out of Egypt, the Exodus story.

[7]Here and below, Deut has "Neither shalt thou."

[8]Here and below, Deut has "or."