

The Ten Commandments 1. Introduction. I Adonai, your God am the One

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I am the Lord your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of bondage

Exodus 20:1-2 (RSV).

Questions, Topics

Questions and topics taken largely from the introduction and chapter 1 in **Broken Tablets : Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves**. Ed. by: Rachel S. Mikva. Jewish Lights Pub; 1999,

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1. Introduction

1.1. "The Ten Utterances"

Hebrew *aseret hadibrot* = "the ten utterances"

Greek *deka logoi* ("the ten words").

- From the Greek comes the alternative name for the ten commandments = the "**decatalogue**"
(see pages 317 and 350 of the Book of Common Prayer)

1.2. Scripture Reference

Exodus 20: 1-17: God's words to Israel from Mount Sinai

Deuteronomy 5:6-21: Moses's recapitulation to Israel of what God told him at Mount Horeb

1.3. Context

Part of the story of Israel's liberation from Egypt.

The basis for Israel's continuing relationship with God = "covenant."

The way to lead Israel to the fullness of life God intended.

Obedience to the commandments is a response of love from a grateful Israel.

1.4. Numbering

Varies among the religious traditions:

Commandment	Jews and Most Christian Traditions (from Rabbinic and reformed traditions)	Roman Catholic, Lutherans (after Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine)
I am the Lord your God . . .	1. *	1.
Have no other God before me.* Do not make for yourself an idol . . .	2.*	1.
Do not lift up the name of God in vain	3.	2.
Remember the Sabbath	4.	3.
Honor you father and mother...	5.	4.
You shall not murder...	6.	5.
You shall not commit adultery	7.	6.
You shall not steal	8.	7.
You shall not give false testimony	9.	8.
You shall not covet your neighbor's house, wife...	10.	9 and 10

* The Christians traditions give Exodus 20:2-3 as the first Commandment, and Exodus 20:4-6 as the second. However, some Jewish sources give Exodus 20:2 as the first Commandment, and Exodus 20:3-6 as the second.

1.5. Arrangement and Order

In Jewish tradition, the arrangement of the commandments on the two tablets has significance.

That arrangement is:

- five on one tablet, five on the other
- **first tablet:** obligations primarily to God
- **second tablet:** obligations primarily to each other
- **bridge:** 5th commandment (honor your father and mother). Father and mother are our immediate “creators,” mediators of God’s gift of life to us

first tablet	second tablet	why?
1. I am the Lord your God...	6. You shall not murder	killing destroys a reflection of God (we are each in God's image)
2. Have no other God. . .	7. You shall not commit adultery	religion and marriage both require fidelity
3. Do not lift up the name of God in vain...	8. You shall not steal	those who steal may in the end deny it by swearing falsely in God's name
4. Remember the Sabbath	9. You shall not bear false witness	profaning the Sabbath is like testifying God did not create the world
5. Honor your father and mother	10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife	such coveting can lead to complex relationships or families; making it difficult to give both parents a proper honor

God's name is not mentioned in the commandments on the second tablet. Roman emperor Hadrian (76 to 138 AD) asked Rabbi Joshua ben Chananyah why this was. His answer: God's name cannot lie adjacent to heinous crimes, just as the emperor does not put his name on outhouses and such.

The last five commandments about our relationship with others parallels the law codes of other ancient near Eastern peoples. What is unique however is that breaking these laws about our relationship with others also effects our relationship with God

1.6. At Mount Sinai

1.6.1. *Written and Oral Torah in Rabbinic Judaism*

After the destruction of the temple, the **Torah** became the central focus of Jewish faith.

Whenever two or more gather together to study Torah, there will be the Divine Presence, the *Shekhinah*.

God gave the Commandments and the entire Torah (written and oral = all rabbinic interpretation) to Moses at Mount Sinai. When a rabbi interprets Torah today, he is making oral Torah, and speaks with the authority of the Torah.

1.6.2 *The Scene at Mount Sinai in Exodus Rabbah*

The description from the rabbinic text **Exodus Rabbah** of the scene at Mount Sinai when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments:

- whole world hushed in silence
- God began to speak
- with each word, the entire world filled with a unique fragrance of spice
- each word as it spread broke out into 70 languages, filling the earth

2. The First Commandment

2.1. I, Adonai your God, am the One

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” *Exodus 20:2 (NRSV)*

‘I, Adonai your God, [am the one] who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from a slavehouse

Exodus 20:2 (tr. Eugene Borowitz, in Broken Tablets)

2.2. Can God Command Belief?

Is this really a commandment?

How can God demand we believe when belief is not under our direct voluntary control?

Some have suggested the “first commandment” should be considered a *preface* to the actual commands that follow. Maimonides on the other hand, said it is the first among the commandments, the essential pillar upon which all else rests

2.3. A God who is an “I”

“I am the LORD your God. . .

An “I” *speaks* (first person, pronoun, singular) in this commandment:

- One God vs. the polytheism of the ancient world
- An entity with characteristics of personhood
 - vs. the later Aristotle’s God as Pure Intellect continuously contemplating perfection (itself)
 - vs. the later Neoplatonic idea of “The Good” or “the One:” above definition, structure, limitation, intelligibility

2.4. The Name of God

YHWH
יהוה

Hebrew letters *yod* י, *he* ה, *waw* ו, *he* ה

This is the **Tetragrammaton**:

This name was spoken only by the high priest on the high holy days (Yom Kippur) in the temple in ancient Israel. At that time:

- Levite choirs increased their volumes to hide the sound.
- Those in the temple threw themselves prostrate to the ground.

The tetragrammaton is no longer pronounced since the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 A.D. No one now knows the correct pronunciation.

Because it is otherwise blasphemy to say the name of God, when a devout Jew encounters **YHWH** in the Hebrew scripture, they substitute a word that could not possibly sound like the real name of God -- **Adonai**, meaning “my LORD.”

The pronunciation of **YHWH** as “Yahweh” is a guess by Jewish scholars (Masorettes) some time before the 10th century.

Christian bible translators in the 16th century combined the consonants of **YHWH** (poorly transliterated as "**JHVH**," with the vowels of the substitute name **Adonai** to produce the artificial hybrid name Jehovah.

Devout Jews: saying aloud the approximation "Yahweh" is getting too close to the real name and hence is blasphemous.

Hallelujah = "Praise Yah"

2.5. "Your" God

God is God of everyone and everything. But the "your" here is a singular pronoun: God is addressing us as individuals.

implications:

- Adonai is "my" God in a very personal and intimate way
- to bring the fullness of life intended by the commandments, to fulfill God's covenant with the people of God, we must respond as individuals, one by one

2.6. God the "Bringer Out;" The Involved God

Adonai does not say

"I am the LORD your God, all powerful, almighty, omniscience, omnipresent, who created you and the universe you live in. . ."

but rather:

"who brought you out the land of Egypt. . ."

What might it say about God that he would describe himself in this way? What does it emphasize?

- God is the "bringer out"
- God is both transcendent and immanent in creation, a participant in the world and in our lives
- "high and exalted beyond this world yet present within history"

The divine presence is incarnate in all the world. God is *ruach kol basar*; the spirit that resides in all flesh. That presence may be brought to consciousness in the mind of every human who is open to it, as it may be blocked out and negated entirely by the closing of the human heart, by cruelty, or by the denial of God's image. The *Shechinah*, the divine presence in our world, does not dwell where she is not wanted."

- Arthur Green, in **Seek My Face, Speak My Name**, quoted in **Broken Tablets**

2.7. God the Liberator from Bondage

Can be a metaphor for anything that releases us from the many possible bondages that impede our freedom to act properly / live fully (listed examples here from **Broker Tablets**)

- ghetto to emancipation
- despotism to democracy
- ignorance to knowledge
- unemployment to job
- discrimination to equality
- illness to health

- neurosis to maturity
- depression to hope

Whenever we are so freed, it is through the God who liberates from bondage, who brings us out of slavery

3. References

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