

Bible Study Magazine - Counting the 10 Commandments

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Counting the Ten Commandments

Michael S. Heiser

One of the most enduring elements of the Bible and the Judaeo-Christian worldview within Western culture is the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. Even if one can't recite them all, most people have seen the fiery finger of God etch the commandments into two stone tablets as Moses—for many of us, Charlton Heston—watches in awe.

It seems to go without saying that the list of the Ten Commandments is something that Judaism and Christianity have always agreed upon. Well, that is not exactly true.

Historically speaking, Jews and Christians—and even denominations within Christianity—have disagreed on exactly how the Ten Commandments should be listed and expressed. In fact, how to precisely spell out the commandments was an issue of considerable importance during the Protestant Reformation. The difference concerns how many commands are to be found in the first six verses and last two verses of Exod 20:2-17, the initial listing of the commandments received by Moses at Sinai.¹ The chart below illustrates the disagreements.

One point of context is required before we can understand the thinking behind the differences in the listing and expression of the commandments. Any listing of the commandments must result in a total of ten, because three other passages of Scripture fix the number of commandments at ten. Exodus 34:28, Deut 4:13, and Deut 10:4 each clearly tell us that God gave Moses *àsereth hadvarim* (“ten words”; “ten statements”) at Sinai.

Interestingly, the Jewish tradition treats the statement in Exod 20:2 (compare Deut 5:6) as a command when the wording has no imperative force to it at all. This latitude arises from the fact that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament exclusively uses *àsereth hadvarim* (“ten words”) instead of *àsereth hamitsvot* (“ten commandments”) with respect to the contents of Exod 20 and Deut 5. After regarding Exod 20:2 as the first “word” of the ten, verses 3-6 are then thematically understood as speaking to a single prohibition: making idols for worship.

There are actually three imperative statements in this group of verses (“You shall have no other gods before me”; “You shall not make for yourself a carved image”; “You shall not bow down to them or serve them”), but to consider them as separate commands would move the total beyond ten.

Christian perceptions of Exod 20 are not rooted in the Hebrew terminology *àsereth hadvarim* (“ten words”), and so Christian formulations do not regard verse one as the first point of the Decalogue. As a result, all of Exod 20:2-6 is considered the starting point, and the imperative wording (“You shall not”) prompted the “commandment” terminology so widely known and used today.



Reformed, Anglican,
 & Greek Orthodox
Roman Catholic,
 Lutheran

2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."	1	Preface ²	1
3 "You shall have no other gods before me."	2	1	
4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."		2	
7 "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."	3		2
8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep 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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."	4		3
12 "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."	5		4
13 "You shall not murder."	6		5
14 "You shall not commit adultery."	7		6
15 "You shall not steal."	8		7
16 "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."	9		8
17 ^a "You shall not covet your neighbor's house;"	10		9
17 ^b "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."			10

The enumeration adopted by Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Lutheranism originated with Augustine. While they prefer it, the enumeration of Augustine is not a point of dogma. Section 2066 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*³ is representative of the acknowledgement that, “The division and numbering of the Commandments have varied in the course of history.” Reformed Protestants and Greek Orthodox Christians also reject verse 1 as a command, but distinguish verse 3 from verses 4-6 as the first and second commands. This position is likewise not dogmatically taken.

The last two verses are the other major point of divergence in expressing the number and contents of the commandments. Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism divide Exod 20:17 into two commands to achieve the number ten, a necessity in view of seeing Exod 20:2-6 as the first command. This dichotomy is perhaps puzzling, since the entirety of the content of verse 17 speaks about one’s household and possessions, and in light of the thematic grouping at the beginning of the Decalogue. Thematic grouping at the beginning of the Decalogue and thematic splitting at the end doesn’t make sense—unless one keeps in mind the need to wind up with ten!

Despite the numerical disagreement over how to count the commandments, the moral core of the Judaeo-Christian ethic has never been in doubt among those Jews and Christians who take the Bible seriously. A lack of certainty on how to count the Ten Commandments is no impediment to understanding their importance for honoring God and our fellow human beings.
