

# The Decalogue / Ten Commandments:

## Similarities and Differences in Religious Traditions

The "Ten Commandments" (also called the "Decalogue") obviously come from the Hebrew Bible, but it is not so obvious to determine exactly what they are or how to count them. These commandments are recorded in two different biblical chapters (Exodus 20:1-17 & Deuteronomy 5:6-21), yet each text is slightly different, and neither passage explicitly numbers the commandments one through ten.

Although there are actually more than ten imperative verbs (at least 15) in each of these texts, several other biblical passages refer specifically to the "ten words" or "ten statements" (Heb: *aseret ha-dibrot*; Gk: *deka logoi*) that God gave to Moses (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4). In several books of the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, or other apostles quote some of the Jewish commandments, both from the Decalogue and from other parts of the Torah, although they never enumerate a list of exactly ten.

Most Christians believe that the Ten Commandments form the core of God's Law (the "Torah" or "Instruction" given by God through Moses, in the first five books of the Bible). Yet these are far from the only commandments contained in the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic Jewish tradition maintains that the Torah contains a total of 613 commandments ("*mitzvot*"): 248 positive ones (injunctions, what one must do) and 365 negative ones (prohibitions, what one must avoid).

Moreover, in Jewish understanding, all 613 *mitzvot* are equally important, so the Decalogue is not really considered the "core"; ritual and dietary commandments are considered just as important as theological or ethical commands. If you break any one of them, you've broken God's Law. When Jesus is asked which of the commandments is the first or most important, he does not quote the Decalogue directly, but rather combines quotations from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (love God; the "Shema" of Judaism) and Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbor).

As a result of all the discrepancies, Jews, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and other Protestants have subdivided and numbered the Decalogue differently over the centuries. Jews, Orthodox Christians, and most Protestants more closely follow the version of Exodus 20, while Catholics more closely follow the version of Deuteronomy 5. The main discrepancies come at the beginning and end of the lists of the Ten Commandments, as explained below:

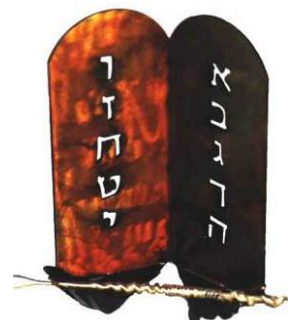
Exodus 20:1-17 (NRSV)	Jewish	Orth.	Prot.	Luth.	Cath.	Deuteronomy 5:6-21 (NRSV)
1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;	1	1	0	1	1	6 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;
3 <u>you shall have no</u> other gods before me.	2		1			7 <u>you shall have no</u> other gods before me.
4 <u>You shall not make</u> for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 <u>You shall not bow down</u> to them <u>or worship</u> them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.		2	2			8 <u>You shall not make</u> for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 9 <u>You shall not bow down</u> to them <u>or worship</u> them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, 10 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 <u>You shall not make wrongful use</u> of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.	3	3	3	2	2	11 <u>You shall not make wrongful use</u> of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.
8 <u>Remember</u> the sabbath day, and <u>keep it holy</u> . 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; <u>you shall not do any work--</u> you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.	4	4	4	3	3	12 <u>Observe</u> the sabbath day and <u>keep it holy</u> , as the LORD your God commanded you. 13 Six days <u>you shall labor</u> and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; <u>you shall not do any work--</u> you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 <u>Remember</u> that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.
12 <u>Honor</u> your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.	5	5	5	4	4	16 <u>Honor</u> your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.
13 <u>You shall not murder</u> .	6	6	6	5	5	17 <u>You shall not murder</u> .
14 <u>You shall not commit adultery</u> .	7	7	7	6	6	18 <u>Neither shall you commit adultery</u> .
15 <u>You shall not steal</u> .	8	8	8	7	7	19 <u>Neither shall you steal</u> .
16 <u>You shall not bear false witness</u> against your neighbor.	9	9	9	8	8	20 <u>Neither shall you bear false witness</u> against your neighbor.
17a <u>You shall not covet</u> your neighbor's house;  17b <u>you shall not covet</u> your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.	10	10	10	9 & 10	9 & 10	21a <u>Neither shall you covet</u> your neighbor's wife.  21b <u>Neither shall you desire</u> your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.
<b>Exodus 20</b>	<b>Jewish</b>	<b>Orth.</b>	<b>Prot.</b>	<b>Luth.</b>	<b>Cath.</b>	<b>Deuteronomy 5</b>

#### NOTES:

The main discrepancies occur at the **BEGINNING** of the texts, in the first and/or second commandments:

- o Most contemporary *Jews* consider Exod 20:1-2 to be the first commandment, enjoining people to recognize the LORD as their God, while the second commandment forbids both polytheistic beliefs and practices (20:3-6 together).
- o Many *Protestants* consider Exod 20:1-2 (and Deut 5:6) to be a preface to the Decalogue, so that the first commandment opposes polytheism (no other gods; Exod 20:3), while the second commandment opposes idolatry (worshiping idols; 20:4-6).
- o *Catholics* and *Lutherans* consider all of Exod 20:1-6 and Deut 5:6-10 to be a single commandment, both enjoining monotheism and forbidding polytheism



The other main discrepancies occur at the **END** of the texts, in the ninth and/or tenth commandments:

- **Jews** and most **Protestants** consider the last commandment to be the injunction against coveting anything;
- **Lutherans** follow Martin Luther's division of Exodus 20:17, which first prohibits coveting someone's property (#9), then the spouse (#10).
- **Catholics** follow St. Augustine's division of Deuteronomy 5:21, which first mentions the spouse (#9), and then the property (#10).

For further comparative information, see the article on the "[Ten Commandments](#)" at wikipedia.org

For explanations of the Decalogue from the perspective of various groups of Jews and Christians, see also:

- **Jewish:** [Aseret ha-Dibrot: The "Ten Commandments"](#); from [Judaism 101](#) online
- **Orthodox:** "[Our Faith: The Ten Commandments](#)"; from the Greek Orthodox Church in America
- **Reform Protestant:** from "[The Ten Commandments Project](#)" or the [Westminster Shorter Catechism](#)
- **Episcopal:** from the [Episcopal Catechism](#) or the *Book of Common Prayer*; from Anglicansonline.org
- **Lutheran:** Teachings on the Ten Commandments from Martin Luther's [Small Catechism](#)
- **Catholic:** Part Three ("Life in Christ"), Section Two ("The Ten Commandments") of the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#).

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## Quotations and Applications of the Decalogue elsewhere in the Bible:

Nowhere else in the Bible is the entire Decalogue quoted, although many passages of the Old and New Testaments obviously mention one or more of the Ten Commandments. The following texts mention several of the commandments together:

- **Leviticus 19:1-18** - The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: *You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.* 3 You shall each **revere your mother and father**, and you shall **keep my sabbaths**: I am the LORD your God. 4 **Do not turn to idols or make cast images** for yourselves: I am the LORD your God... 11 You shall **not steal**; you shall **not deal falsely**; and you shall **not lie** to one another. 12 And you shall **not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God**: I am the LORD. 13 You shall **not defraud** your neighbor; you shall **not steal**; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. 14 You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. 15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. 17 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*: I am the LORD.
- **Jeremiah 7:3-11** - Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. 4 Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." 5 For if you truly *amend your ways and your doings*, if you truly *act justly* one with another, 6 if you *do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place*, and if you *do not go after other gods* to your own hurt, 7 then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. 8 Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. 9 Will you **steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods** that you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" --only to go on doing all these abominations? 11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.
- **Hosea 4:1-2** - Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. 2 **Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery** break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed.
- **Wisdom 14:21-31** (*focusing on idolatry, but connecting it with other evils*) - And this became a hidden trap for mankind, because men, in bondage to misfortune or to royal authority, bestowed on objects of stone or wood the name that ought not to be shared. 22 Afterward it was not enough for them to err about the knowledge of God, but they live in great strife due to ignorance, and they call such great evils peace. 23 For whether they **kill children** in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries, or hold frenzied revels with strange customs, 24 they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either treacherously **kill one another**, or grieve one another by **adultery**, 25 and all is a raging riot of blood and **murder, theft** and **deceit**, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, **perjury**, 26 confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favors, pollution of souls, sex perversion, disorder in marriage, **adultery**, and debauchery. 27 *For the worship of idols not to be named is the*

*beginning and cause and end of every evil.* 28 For their worshipers either rave in exultation, or prophesy lies, or live unrighteously, or readily commit perjury; 29 for because they trust in lifeless idols they swear wicked oaths and expect to suffer no harm. 30 But just penalties will overtake them on two counts: because they thought wickedly of God in devoting themselves to idols, and because in deceit they swore unrighteously through contempt for holiness. 31 For it is not the power of the things by which men swear, but the just penalty for those who sin, that always pursues the transgression of the unrighteous."

- **Matthew 5:17-48** - In an extensive discussion of the laws of God given to Moses, Jesus directly quotes several passages from the Hebrew Bible, including the commandments against **murder** (v. 21), **adultery** (v. 27), **swearing falsely** (v. 33, citing Lev 19:12), as well as revenge ("eye for eye, tooth for tooth"; v. 38; citing Exod 21:24//Lev 24:20), and concluding the commandment to love your neighbor (v. 43, citing Lev 19:18).
- **Mark 7:10** and **Matt 15:4** - In a discussion about food and purity commandments, Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes of not keeping the commandment to "**Honor your father and your mother.**"
- **Mark 7:20-23** - Slightly later, Jesus explains to his disciples that foods do not defile people, but in contrast, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. / For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, **theft, murder, / adultery**, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. / All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."
- **Matt 15:17-20** - The parallel passage in Matthew has a list that is similar, but slightly shorter: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? / But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. / For out of the heart come evil intentions, **murder, adultery**, fornication, **theft, false witness**, slander. / These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."
- **Mark 10:17-22** (par. Matt 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23) - When someone asks Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' reply includes the statement, "You know the commandments: 'You shall not **murder**; You shall not commit **adultery**; You shall not **steal**; You shall not **bear false witness**; You shall not defraud; **Honor your father and mother.**' " (Mark 10:19)
- The parallel text in **Matthew 19:18-19** drops the command not to "defraud" but adds a citation of Lev 19:18: "You shall not **murder**; You shall not commit **adultery**; You shall not **steal**; You shall not **bear false witness**; **Honor your father and mother**; also, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"
- The parallel text in **Luke 18:20** is similar, but slightly shorter and in a different order: "You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit **adultery**; You shall not **murder**; You shall not **steal**; You shall not **bear false witness**; **Honor your father and mother.**"
- **Romans 13:8-10** - In a discussion of ethical duties, Paul says: "Owe no one anything, except to *love one another*; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. / The commandments, 'You shall not commit **adultery**; You shall not **murder**; You shall not **steal**; You shall not **covet**'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, '*Love your neighbor as yourself.*' / Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." (also citing Lev 19:18)
- **James 2:8-11** - "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, '*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*' (again Lev 19:18) / But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. / For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. / For the one who said, 'You shall not commit **adultery**,' also said, 'You shall not **murder.**' Now if you do not commit **adultery** but if you **murder**, you have become a transgressor of the law."

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## Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- If the Ten Commandments are to be displayed in courthouses or other public places in the United States, *whose version* should be used?
- How would Christians feel if it were the Jewish version? How do Jews or Catholics feel when it is the Protestant version (as is often the case)?
- Should the original Hebrew text be displayed or an English translation? If in English, which one: KJV, NRSV, NIV, NASB, NAB, NJB, etc.?
- Even if one tries to avoid these issues by displaying only numbers to symbolize the commandments, what numbers should be used: Hebrew, Roman, or Arabic? And how many commandments should be put on each of the two tablets: 5+5 or 3+7 or 6+4? Or should they all be on one tablet?