

David Noel Freedman

## THE NINE COMMANDMENTS: THE SECRET PROGRESS OF ISRAEL'S SINS

Chapter 39 of *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation*:  
William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids and Cambridge (1997),  
pp. 457-469

Embedded in the sequence of books from Genesis through Kings is a hitherto unnoticed sequence of violations of the Ten Commandments, one by one, book by book, by the community of Israel, leading, in the end, to her exile.

I would like to suggest that this sequence of violations may reveal the hand of the final editor of this primary history— Genesis through Kings— and reinforces its overarching theme: The violation of God's law, step by step, commandment by commandment, results in Israel's destruction. [See a fuller presentation in the author's *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991), 1-39; see also Chapter 42 in this volume.]

Explaining all this is a tall order; I hope you will find it as gripping to read as I found it exciting to explore. Whether it is also compelling is for the reader to decide. I look forward to the letters that will soon appear in Readers Reply.

The primary history in the Hebrew Bible consists of nine books:

- | <b>A. Torah (Pentateuch)</b> | <b>B. Former Prophets</b> |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Genesis                   | 6. Joshua                 |
| 2. Exodus                    | 7. Judges                 |
| 3. Leviticus                 | 8. Samuel                 |
| 4. Numbers                   | 9. Kings                  |
| 5. Deuteronomy               |                           |

In our Bibles today Samuel and Kings are divided into two parts. In the official Hebrew canon, however, Samuel and Kings each originally consisted of a single long book, which was subsequently divided into two parts, presumably for ease in handling and for reference purposes. The same is true, incidentally, of Chronicles,

which, however, is a later composition, not part of the primary history and indeed appears at the very end of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup>

In English and Greek Bibles, the book of Ruth is attached to Judges, but that insertion reflects secondary and derivative arrangements; in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Ruth appears near the end.

So these nine books from Genesis through Kings form the primary history of Israel as recounted in the Hebrew Bible. They constitute a single narrative sequence, tracing the story of Israel from its origins— and the origins of everything— to the end of the nation, the downfall of the southern kingdom of Judah in 587/586 B.C.E. and the captivity of the survivors in Babylon.

This major, central block of material, almost half of the entire Hebrew Bible, was compiled, and promulgated, in my opinion, sometime in the latter part of the exile, not long after the story ends, say about 550 B.C.E. The last dated entry in the story is 561 B.C.E. when the king of Babylon released Judah's King Jehoiachin from prison (2 Kgs. 25:27). The exiles began to return under the Persian monarch Cyrus in 539 B.C.E.

Clearly the primary history is comprised of compositions of diverse authorship, and includes materials derived from a wide spectrum of sources, some cited,

---

<sup>1</sup> It is no accident that Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are the three longest books (by word count) in the Hebrew Bible (between 24,000 and 26,000 words each) and therefore the most likely to be divided. The division may have occurred when the Greek translation of these books was made, because the translations are longer than the originals and we can speculate that the books had reached their practical limit in terms of scroll length. Thus anything longer than that would literally be divided.

some alluded to, and others implied. It is generally regarded by scholars as an assemblage or aggregation of at least four major written sources— J (the Yahwist), E (the Elohist), P (the Priestly code), and D (the Deuteronomist). J and E, the earliest, were soon combined as JE. Then JE was incorporated into the Priestly code to form what I call the P work, which consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The next five books— Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings— are also generally regarded as a unitary sequence known as the Deuteronomic history. We may call this the D work. So together our nine books are comprised principally of the P work and the D work, combined by a final editor.

Although the finished product reflects a great deal of editorial activity, this primary history nevertheless exhibits certain, I would say unmistakable, marks of unity. Over the years, I have devoted considerable research to this unity and what I have to say here is part of the results of this research.

Briefly my argument is that a single person (or a small editorial committee, but inevitably dominated by one person) was responsible for assembling the constituent elements of this great narrative and putting the account in the orderly arrangement in which we now have it. Furthermore, while scrupulously preserving the materials available and entrusted to his care, and observing the rules of the editorial task, he nevertheless was able to contribute to the final assemblage and to produce a unified work.

The work of the editor, or redactor, has always interested me— for obvious reasons— and while my experience is doubtless quite different from an ancient editor's, there must also be elements in common. The first obligation of an editor is to recognize his (or her) constraints or limitations. But without encroaching on the province of the author, the editor, especially if assembling or compiling a composite work including the contributions of several authors, has not only the right but the obligation to organize and arrange the material to bring out its continuity and coherence, to shape a unity that is inherent but not fully realized in the component parts. That is, in essence, what I suppose to have occurred with the primary history when it was created by the compiler, presumably a Jerusalem priest in the Babylonian exile.

The evidence for such unifying editorial activity is to be seen in the links between the parts of the primary history that derive from different authors. The further apart the links are in the story, the more likely they are to reflect the work of the editor. Thus editorial touches that connect Genesis with Kings are especially indicative of the work of the redactor or compiler. Consider, e.g., the apparent, if superficial, link between the first stories in Genesis (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel), both of which deal with punishment for sin or crime, and

the fate of the nation at the end of Kings. In both the Adam and Eve story and the Cain and Abel story (Gen. 1-4), the outcome of disobedience is banishment or exile, precisely the fate of the presumed readers of those stories, who are themselves the subjects of the final chapters of Kings, the exiles in Babylon.

Moreover, Babylon itself is the subject of the story of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11), the first narrative after the renewal of life on earth following the flood. The tower of Babel story supplies the transition to the account of Abraham's family and the beginning of the patriarchal narrative. So what began in Babylon more than a millennium before ends in the same place for his remote descendants: from Babylon to Babylon provides a neat summary or envelope for the whole of the primary history. Only a compiler-editor would have achieved explicitly what was only implicit in the separately authored blocks of material.

Let us turn now to a more elaborate structural feature that pervades the whole primary history, cuts across source and authorship lines, and, if sustainable as the work of the compiler, may give us an entirely new perspective on how he managed this vast enterprise.

It is generally agreed that a principal theme of the primary history— and of its major components, the D work certainly, if not equally the chief element of the P work— is to explain how it happened that Israel, the chosen people of God, who were rescued by him from bondage in Egypt and established in a new homeland, the land of Canaan, to be his nation, lost their independence and their land, and ended up in exile far away. While the details of this tragedy, the decline and fall of the two nations, Israel and Judah, are given in political/military terms, if not socioeconomic ones, the overriding theme is that just as Israel was created by God, so it could be and was destroyed by him. The reason for the latter act was that, from the beginning, the relationship between God and his people was understood to be morally conditioned and was explicated in terms of a binding agreement or covenant between them. Thus, while the deliverance of Israel and its establishment as a nation were the deeds of a gracious God, who acted on the basis of a prior commitment to the patriarchs, beginning with Abraham, nevertheless the continued existence of the nation, not to speak of its success, security, and prosperity, would depend upon its behavior, specifically its adherence to a code of conduct agreeable and pleasing to God, and spelled out in the hundreds of rules and regulations, moral and cultic, civic and religious, social, political, and economic, which permeate the pages of the Torah.

These in turn are summed up in the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, with which every Israelite must have been familiar. Here, in a word (or Ten Words, as they are called in the Hebrew Bible), is the epitome of the

covenant, a summary of the rules by which all Israel is to live under the sovereign rule of God.

There is both promise and threat in the terms of the covenant, as both Moses (in the speeches in Deuteronomy) and Joshua (in his speeches in Josh. 23-24) make clear: If Israel obeys the laws of the covenant, then all will be well and Israel will prosper under the aegis of its God; if, however, the people disobey the commandments and rebel against the authority of their God, then everything will be lost: prosperity, security, nationhood, and land.

The story then is the story of how Israel failed to keep its side of the bargain, failed to observe the requirements of the compact with God, and was ultimately punished for this dereliction of duty.

Most readers—scholars and lay people—will probably agree about all this. Clearly there are other themes and important features to the primary history, but certainly the interpretation of Israel's history and destiny in this major narrative properly emphasizes Israel's covenant obligation and its persistent and repeated failure to live up to God's central demands.

Now I want to try to put myself in the shoes of the redactor-compiler, or to sit at his desk, and ask how I can sharpen the focus, highlight the drama of this decline and fall of the nation(s), to bring home to the survivors the necessary, if onerous, lesson of the past, so as to strengthen their resolve in their present affliction and prepare them for something better in the future, a future that will hold out a very similar combination of threat and promise.

The first thing I would do would be to make a special point of the Decalogue as the core and center of the covenant. The simplest way to do this, of course, would be by repetition. The Decalogue is found in both the P work (in Exod. 20:2-17) and the D work (in Deut. 5:6-12), which contains an older source of the Decalogue. Instead of combining the two or conflating them, the compiler keeps them separate. So the Decalogue appears twice in the story, near the beginning of Israel's forty-year march from Egypt to Canaan and just before the end of the journey, as Israel is about to enter Canaan.

Moreover, the repetition of the Decalogue is found at a strategic point in the literary structure. The book of Deuteronomy is at the center, the fifth book of the nine books in the sequence, and thus serves as the pivot or apex of the entire work. That this is not just a numerical accident or coincidence is shown by the contents of Deuteronomy: Moses, the central figure of the primary history, dominates the whole book of Deuteronomy, which consists of a series of addresses by Israel's greatest leader toward the end of his life: his valedictory, which has special authority and power. In these sermons, Moses not only reviews the history of

his people (thereby providing legitimate reason to repeat the Ten Commandments) but also, as a true prophet, forecasts what is going to happen to them in the future, depending upon their behavior. So the Decalogue is not only at the beginning of the national history but it is also at the center of the narrative.

Further, the Decalogue symbolizes and summarizes the covenant, the obligations of which fall on every Israelite, first as an individual, personally responsible for obedience to the commandments, but also as a member of the community, which is answerable to God as a whole for the behavior for its individual members.

We can outline the sequence of events as follows: Israel was delivered from bondage in Egypt and was brought to the sacred mountain, Sinai. There the Decalogue was given as a precis of the terms of the covenant. The people agree to its terms, and the covenant is solemnly ratified by sacrifices and a common meal at the mountain (Exod. 24). The rest of the story is told in the succeeding books and is an account of repeated violations of the covenant, interrupted by occasional reversals and reforms, but culminating in the renunciation of Israel by its maker and founder, and the destruction of the nation: first the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E. and then the southern kingdom of Judah in 587/586 B.C.E. The end is captivity in Babylon.

How can the final editor of this mighty history make the case more precise, more dramatic, and more suspenseful, and at the same time provide a way through the complex details of a 600-year history from beginning to end?

I believe what he did was this: Using the Decalogue as his point of departure, he portrays Israel as violating each one of the commandments directly and explicitly. Further, these commandments are violated in order, one by one. Given the fact that he has a group of books (i.e., scrolls) to deal with, he assigns, in general, one commandment and one violation to each book.

Wherever possible, the seriousness of the episode is stressed in such a way as to show how the violation (usually by an individual) nevertheless involves or implicates the whole nation, so that the survival of the nation itself is put in jeopardy. Only the extraordinary intervention of a leader or a precipitate change of direction on the part of the people provides reason to spare them. In each instance, God finally relents and the relationship is patched up. But the threat and warning remain and are strengthened, so that each succeeding violation brings Israel (and Judah) ever closer to destruction. At the end of the string, all of the commandments will have been violated and God's patience will have run out. Let us now see if—and how—this happens.

The Ten Commandments,<sup>2</sup> in abbreviated form, are listed below:

- |                       |                    |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Apostasy           | 6. Murder          |
| 2. Idolatry           | 7. Adultery        |
| 3. Blasphemy          | 8. Stealing        |
| 4. Sabbath observance | 9. False testimony |
| 5. Parental respect   | 10. Coveting       |

Because the editor is working with existing literary works and not just a collection of bits and pieces, he is naturally limited in the degree and extent to which he can arrange or rearrange, organize and reorganize, or manipulate his material. Hence we can expect certain deviations and adjustments as we go along. For example, the fact that the story of covenant-making and covenant-breaking properly begins with the book of Exodus presents him with something of a problem. True, Genesis has covenants and covenant ceremonies (e.g., with Noah in Gen. 9 and with Abraham in Gen. 15 and 17), but these are not the same as the covenant made at Sinai/Horeb and mediated by Moses, and are not related to the Decalogue. So the editor dealt with this problem simply by beginning with Exodus and doubling up the commandments violated in that book.

*Apostasy and Idolatry.* Immediately after the Ten Commandments are given on Mt. Sinai and the Israelites agree to them, Moses goes up to the mountain to receive instructions for building the tabernacle. During his absence, the well-known incident of the golden calf occurs (Exod. 32). The episode is described in such a way as to make it clear that the Israelites have violated the first as well as the second commandment: "You shall have no other gods beside me" (Exod. 20:3) and "You shall not make for yourself a graven image" (Exod. 20:4).

The Israelites not only make the golden calf (a graven image), they speak of it as symbolizing one or more gods (apostasy): "And they said, 'These are thy gods, O Israel, who brought thee up from the land of Egypt' " (Exod. 32:4).

Thus, we have not only accounted for the first two commandments, but also for the first two books of the primary history.

When we probe a bit deeper into this episode we find another aspect of it that will be repeated book after book, commandment after commandment: While some Israelites are guilty of violating the covenant in connection with the golden calf, others are not (the Levites), but the existence of the community is threatened. God tells Moses that he will wipe out Israel and create a new people from Moses' progeny (Exod.

32:10). It is only after Moses intercedes and there is a partial slaughter of the guilty apostates that God relents and the community is allowed to live and carry on its activity (Exod. 32:11-14; cf. w. 31-35).

This episode becomes the paradigm for the whole subsequent history of Israel. A violation of any of the commandments is a violation of all of them, indeed of the whole covenant, but the primary category is always expressed in terms of apostasy and idolatry, which in this sense are a digest or summary of the Decalogue just as the Decalogue itself is a digest of the full range of rules and regulations of the covenant.

*Blasphemy.* The third book is Leviticus, and the third commandment prohibits the misuse of the name of God, i.e., blasphemy: "You shall not invoke the name of Yahweh your God for falsehood" (Exod. 20:7).

There is just such a story in Leviticus. An unnamed man— the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man— "went out among the people of Israel. . . and quarreled" (Lev. 24: 10). Then he "cursed the name and committed blasphemy" (Lev. 24:11). He is brought before Moses and placed in custody until Yahweh's decision is made known. Yahweh then instructs Moses to bring the blasphemer outside the camp where all those who heard the blasphemy are to lay their hands upon his head, and the whole assembly is to stone him (Lev. 24:12-14). Yahweh tells Moses to tell the people, "Any man, if he curses his God, then he shall bear [the consequences of] his sin. The one who curses the name of Yahweh shall surely be put to death, and the whole congregation will stone him— the alien resident as well as the native born— when he curses the name he shall be put to death" (Lev. 24:15-16).

Among the hundreds of laws and regulations imposed on Israel by the covenant, the Ten Commandments stand out in not having a specific penalty attached to them. These are not casuistic laws, stated in terms of cause and effect, crime and punishment, but apodictic laws, flat regulations, obedience to which is simply and unqualifiedly demanded. In the case of the blasphemy we have just recounted in Leviticus, the guilty party is detained until the matter of punishment has been resolved. The Israelites recognize that there has been a serious breach of the covenant, but neither they nor Moses know how to deal with the matter.

When word is received from Yahweh, it is necessary for the whole community, including those who witnessed the crime, to participate in the act of judgment. In that way, the community is cleared of complicity with the guilty person, and escapes the consequences of this fatal breach of the covenant. While the particular occurrence may seem trivial in comparison with the making of the golden calf, the special treatment accorded this passing event shows that the writer (or editor) had

<sup>2</sup> There are several different ways of counting the Decalogue. Different religious bodies have assigned numbers to them in different ways. The numbering here reflects what might be called the consensus position to which most scholars adhere.

in mind the highest level of covenant obligation— the Decalogue.

*Sabbath Observance.* The fourth book in the primary history is Numbers, and the fourth commandment is sabbath observance:

Remember<sup>3</sup> the sabbath day to keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of Yahweh your God. You shall do no work at all, neither you nor your son nor your daughter, your male or female servant, nor your cattle, nor the alien who is within your gates. (Exod. 20:8-10)

In Numbers we find a story about a man who gathered sticks on the sabbath, thus violating the prohibition against doing any work on that day:

While the Israelites were in the wilderness, they found him gathering wood on the sabbath day. So those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and to Aaron and to the whole assembly. They detained him in the guard house, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then Yahweh said to Moses: "The man shall surely be put to death. The whole assembly shall stone him with stones, outside the camp." So the whole assembly brought him outside the camp and they stoned him with stones and he died, as Yahweh had commanded Moses. (Num. 15:32-36)

This story is very much like the one in Leviticus concerning blasphemy. In both cases, a violation of one of the Ten Commandments is recorded and the man responsible is arrested pending sentence and the imposition of appropriate punishment. In both cases the determination of the penalty (death by stoning by the whole assembly) is made by Yahweh through direct communication with Moses. The action by God is taken to supplement the Decalogue itself, which only lists the injunctions but does not specify the punishment. And the severity of the penalty serves to emphasize the centrality and essentiality of these terms of the covenant. Anything less than the removal of the offender would implicate the whole community in the offense and ultimately lead to abrogation of the compact and the dissolution of the nation.

*Parental Respect.* The fifth book is Deuteronomy, and the fifth commandment reads as follows:

Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be prolonged on the land that Yahweh your God is going to give you. (Exod. 20:12)

Once again, there is an account of a violation of a particular commandment. This time, however, it is couched in the hypothetical terminology of case law: prescribing the punishment for a specified crime. In other words, the formulation in Deuteronomy is a

stage beyond Leviticus and Numbers. In the earlier books, we are given the incident or episode that provided the basis or precedent on which the punishment was fixed. Here we have a more general formulation, presumably derived from a particular incident, now lost, or no longer included in the biblical tradition. Here is the statement of it:

If a man has a son, who is contumacious and rebellious [i.e., stubbornly rebellious] and will not obey the orders of his father or his mother; and if they chastise [discipline] him and he persists in his disobedience, then his father and his mother shall lay hold of him and bring him forth to the elders of his city and to the gate of his place. And they [the parents] shall say to the elders of his city: "This son of ours is contumacious and rebellious, and he will not obey our orders; he is [also] an idler and a sot." Then all the men of his city shall stone him with stones until he is dead. So shall you destroy the evil from your midst. And as for all Israel, let them pay heed and show reverence. (Deut. 21:18-21)

We turn now to the last four books in the primary history— Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings— and the next four commandments, numbers six, seven, eight, and nine. An adjustment is necessary here because the order in which these books take up these commandments is not precisely the order in which they appear in Exodus and Deuteronomy. This may be simply because the editor or redactor of the primary history was not entirely free to choose his material and therefore had to make some adjustments, or it may be that he was working from a different order of the commandments, or perhaps he was familiar with other traditions concerning the order of the commandments and so could appeal to this diversity to justify his own rearrangement.

In this connection, we note that the order of commandments six, seven, and eight varies among the sources, as the chart reflects. These three commandments are quite short (only two words each in Hebrew, one of which is equivalent to the English "Do not"), so it would be easy for them to become transposed.

In an abbreviated version of the Decalogue in Jeremiah's well-known Sermon in the Temple Courtyard (Jer. 7:9), these three commandments follow the same order in which they are dealt with in the next three books of the Bible (stealing, murder, adultery) rather than the order in which they appear in Exodus and Deuteronomy (murder, adultery, stealing). There may even be a connection here, in view of the well-known literary affinities between the book of Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic history (including the books from Deuteronomy through Kings). So far as the prose sections of Jeremiah are concerned, there is a similarity of style, as well as a sharing of themes and motifs, that strongly supports the idea of connection and relation-

<sup>3</sup> In Deut. 5:12 the word is "observe."

ship. Baruch ben-Neriah, the scribe who was responsible for at least two versions of the book of Jeremiah (Jer. 36:1-32, esp. vv. 4 and 32), may well have had an important role in the compilation and production of the great Deuteronomic history. That perhaps accounts for the fact that the order in which the commandments are violated in the next three books of the primary history is the same as in Jeremiah's sermon.

---

## Order of Commandments

### Six, Seven, and Eight

<i>Hebrew Bible (Exod, Deut):</i>	6. Murder	7. Adultery	8. Theft
<i>Septuagint*:</i>	7. Adultery	8. Theft	6. Murder
<i>Nash Papyrus;† Luke 19:20; Romans 13:9; Philo‡:</i>	7. Adultery	6. Murder	8. Theft
<i>Jer. 7:9; order of violations in Joshua, Judges, Samuel:</i>	8. Theft	6. Murder	7. Adultery

\* The Septuagint (LXX) is an early Greek translation of the Bible.

† The Nash Papyrus, dated to the 2nd century B.C.E., is a 24-line Hebrew text containing the Ten Commandments and part of the *Shema* prayer (Deut. 6:4-5). Of unknown provenance, the papyrus was purchased from an Egyptian antiquities dealer in 1903 by W.L. Nash, for whom it is named.

‡ Philo was an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher who lived in the 1st century B.C.E. and the 1st century C.E., roughly contemporary with Jesus, Paul, and the Jewish sages Hillel and Gamaliel.

*Stealing.* Let us turn once again to the books of the primary history as they proceed to recount Israel's travails ultimately leading to destruction and exile. The sixth book is the book of Joshua. Here the major crime, or transgression of the covenant, is a case of theft, a violation of the eighth commandment in the conventional ordering of the Hebrew Bible but corresponding to the order of the list given in Jeremiah.

The story in Joshua is told in great detail: The Israelites have destroyed Jericho but have themselves been defeated at the next site on their march, Ai. Yahweh then announces the reason for the defeat: Someone has "stolen" some of the booty from Jericho that had been dedicated to Yahweh. The man is identified by lot: Achan ben-Carmi of the tribe of Judah. At the very outset of the story, the focus is on this essential crime:

The Israelites committed a grave offense regarding the dedicated booty. Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerach of the tribe of Judah took some of the sacred booty, and the wrath of Yahweh was kindled against the Israelites. (Josh. 7:1)

As a result, the Israelites are defeated at Ai and this setback jeopardizes their foothold in the land of promise and threatens their whole settlement. The punishment is even more severe and extensive than in the previous cases. Achan and his family are executed by stoning, with the whole community participating.

The story shows how the crime of theft was construed as a capital offense on a par with the other commandments, and punishable in the same manner (by community stoning). In most cases, theft would not be considered a capital offense and the wrongdoer would be punished by a fine, the imposition of damages (requiring payment of double the amount or a larger multiple) or to make restitution in some other suitable fashion. Such cases would hardly serve the stipulated purpose here, but the extraordinary case of Achan does so admirably and thus fits the scheme we have outlined.

As in the other cases, here, too, God takes a direct hand in exposing the crime and the criminal, and in imposing the punishment.

The editor/compiler has adapted the commandment and structured the story in order to fit the overall pattern and so emphasizes the importance of the commandments and the threat to the life of the community, as well as the divine provision for dealing with violations, and the nation's narrow escape from the consequences of divine wrath.

*Murder.* The seventh book, Judges, involves murder, following the order in Jer. 7:9. Judges includes many instances in which someone is killed, e.g., Eglon by Ehud (Judg. 3:15-26, esp. vv. 21-22), Sisera by Jael (Judg. 4:5, esp. 4:17-21; 5:24-27), and numerous Philistines by Samson (Judg. 14-16, esp. 14:19; 15:15; 16:30), but none of these qualify for our purposes. Not only are they not considered violations of the commandment against murder, they are regarded as righteous deeds for the sake of the community. The story we have in mind comes at the very end of the book (Judg. 19-21). It is the story of an unnamed woman, identified only as the Levite's concubine. The men of Gibeah in Benjamin took her by force in the night and mass-raped her (Judg. 19). She crawled back to the house where her master was staying and fell dead. The woman is described in the story as "the murdered woman" (Hebrew *ha-ishshah hannirtsachah*, Judg. 20:4). The root (*ratsach*) is the same as the root of the word for murder in the Decalogue.

The crime is described by the author/editor as the worst in the history of the commonwealth: "Not has

there happened, nor has there been seen anything like this since the day that the Israelites went up from the land of Egypt until this day" (Judg. 19:30).

Not only was the crime a brutal and appalling one by any standards, but it was compounded by the Benjaminites who refused to cooperate with the other tribes in the investigation and resolution of the matter. As it turned out, there was open civil war and the near-destruction of a whole tribe (Benjamin) and the near-dissolution of the entire Israelite league. In the end, under divine guidance the forces of Israel triumphed over the Benjaminites and the nation survived (Judg. 20). Restoring Benjamin to the tribal league was a more difficult and delicate task, but this too was accomplished through the timely intervention of dedicated men (Judg. 21).

*Adultery.* We have now reached the eighth book, the book of Samuel, which will deal with adultery.

While adultery is often mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and especially in the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets), only one example of this crime is spelled out in detail with names of persons and places and specific occasions. This is the well-known case of King David, who took Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and subsequently arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle to conceal the original crime. The climax of the story occurs when the prophet Nathan confronts the guilty king who ultimately repents (2 Sam. 11-12).

For the author/editor of Samuel, David's adultery with Bathsheba was a turning point not only in David's reign, but in the history of the kingdom. All the subsequent trials and ills of the later years, the rebellions and machinations, are described as stemming from that violation by the king, who compounded adultery with murder, forfeited the respect and loyalty of his troops and thus distanced himself from Yahweh, the covenant, and the privileged status he had enjoyed as the anointed of Yahweh. The peril for the country is amply documented, as well as the act of divine remission and compassion. Once again, the kingdom escapes its fate, and the dynasty is preserved for the sake of the nation.

*False Testimony.* The last book in the primary history is Kings, and it invokes the ninth commandment. Once again, royalty is involved and the action produces widespread and very serious consequences for the kingdom. The commandment in this case deals with false testimony in a legal proceeding, what we would call perjury. (In our courts witnesses testify under oath or solemn affirmation, which is required for perjury, whereas in ancient Israel oaths were invoked only under special conditions and only on the defendant.) The story in Kings involves Ahab, king of Israel, his Phoenician wife Jezebel, and a man named Naboth. When

Naboth refuses Ahab's offer to purchase the former's vineyard, Jezebel arranges to have false charges brought against Naboth, accusing him of cursing both God and king. As punishment, Naboth is stoned to death and Ahab takes possession of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs. 21). Here is a clear violation of the ninth commandment ("You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor [fellow citizen]" [Exod. 20:16]).

Once again, an angry prophet, in this case Elijah, denounces the guilty king and decrees dire punishment ("Have you killed and also taken possession? . . . In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood" [1 Kgs. 21:19]). Once again a king is faced with the undeniable facts, is remorseful and repentant. And again God is merciful and postpones the evil day of judgment (1 Kgs. 21:27-29).

The final historical settling of accounts, however, is not long in coming. Before the book of Kings is concluded, both Israel and Judah will have met violent ends as nations, their armies defeated, their countries conquered, their capital cities destroyed, and their leading citizens taken into captivity in faraway lands.

We have come to the end of our string as well: nine books, nine commandments. But what of the tenth: "You shall not covet"?<sup>4</sup>

The tenth commandment is distinctive. Its emphasis is on motivation or attitude, rather than action, as is clearly the case with the other commandments. It functions therefore as a complement or supplement to several of the preceding commandments—stealing, murder, adultery, and false swearing—providing the motivation clause or explanation of the mental or emotional process behind the commission of the crime. In each of the crimes involved in the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth commandments, what lay behind the crime was the illicit desire, the sinful urge to take what belonged to another: the booty from Jericho in the case of Achan, who confesses that he saw the various items in the spoil and "I desired them" (Josh. 7:21)—the same verb as in the Decalogue; the same can be said of the criminals in the story of Judges, whose illegal desire for the Levite led ultimately to the commission of the crime of murder against his concubine; in the case of David and Bathsheba, it was Da-

<sup>4</sup> The full text reads as follows:

*You shall not desire [or covet] your neighbor's house. You shall not desire your neighbor's wife, his man or maidservant, his ox or his ass, or anything at all that belongs to your neighbor. (Exod. 20:17).*

The version in Deut. 5:21 (5:18 in Hebrew) differs slightly from the version in Exodus. In Exodus, the neighbor's house comes before the neighbor's wife; in Deuteronomy the order is reversed. In addition, in Exodus the word for desire or covet (*tahmod*) is repeated; in Deuteronomy, *tahmod* is used the first time, but a synonym, *titawweh*, is used for desire or covet the second time the concept is referred to.

vid's lust after the wife of another man that led to the act of adultery. Likewise, in the case of Naboth's vineyard, it was the king's desire for Naboth's property that led to the violation of the ninth commandment, false testimony.

Thus, with a modicum of ingenuity and adjustment we can correlate the Decalogue and the primary history, and make a dramatically effective correspondence between commandments and books, leading to a climax or culmination in the final collapse of the two kingdoms, the end of national history and the Babylonian captivity.

How could such a correlation have come about in view of the heterogeneous character of the primary history and its clearly multiple authorship? Perhaps it is sheer coincidence (buttressed by the ingenuity of a modern analyst looking for such correlations). Or did a creative redactor consciously set out to construct a history of his people on the framework or scaffolding of the Decalogue, deliberately preserving an overall unity of

the heterogeneous elements by the strategic highlighting of particular themes and devices to bring out the central story, which tells of the covenant between God and Israel, the ultimate consequences of the relationship and the judgment upon and verdict against the nation-states?

The fact that this particular device or pattern has never been observed before— at least to my knowledge should caution against supposing that it was the major or central objective of the redactor. It was simply another, if dramatic, way of showing and stressing the central theme of the history of Israel, and illustrating or reflecting the unity of the account comprising the nine books of the primary history. Israel's history could be told on two levels as the story of its people, but also in terms of its successive violations of the commandments: one by one, book by book, until it ran out of options and possibilities, and was finally destroyed as a nation and its people taken into captivity.



With wit and insight, *The Nine Commandments* boldly challenges previous scholarship and conventional beliefs. David Noel Freedman has been General Editor and a contributing coauthor of the Anchor Bible series since its inception in 1956. He is a professor in Hebrew Bible at the University of California, San Diego, and lives in La Jolla, California.