The Decalogue or Ten Commandments:
Similarities and Differences in Religious Traditions
by Felix Jurit, S.J., Ph.D.

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 logos) 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 "corn": ritual and dietary commandments are considered just as important as theological or ethical commandments. 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:

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<td>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; 3 You shall have no other gods before me.</td>
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<td>6 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 7 you shall have no other gods before me.</td>
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<td>4 You shall not make 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 You shall bow down to them or worship 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>8 You shall not make 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 You shall not bow down to them or worship 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.</td>
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<td>7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>11 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.</td>
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<td>8 Remember the sabbath day, and 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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For 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.</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, 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 Remember 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.</td>
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<td>12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16 Honor 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.</td>
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<td>13 You shall not murder.</td>
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<td>17 You shall not murder.</td>
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<td>14 You shall not commit adultery.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18 Neither shall you commit adultery.</td>
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<td>15 You shall not steal.</td>
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<td>19 Neither shall you steal.</td>
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<td>16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20 Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.</td>
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<td>17a You shall not covet your neighbor's house; 17b You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9 &amp; 10</td>
<td>21a Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. 21b Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.</td>
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NOTES:

- The main discrepancies occur at the BEGINNING of the texts, in the first and/or second commandments:
  - 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).
  - 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).
  - 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 the following links:
  - Jewish: Asefra ha-Dibrowa; 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
  - Episcopalian: from the Episcopal Catechism or the Book of Common Prayer; from AnglicanOnline.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

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 not take vengeance or bear grudge against your neighbor, and you shall not seek for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. 4 You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. 5 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. 6 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profane the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. 7 You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin, you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. 8 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, and 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 14:23-31 (foocusing 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 images 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 feasts, revels with strange customs, 24 or no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, or 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, treachery, perjury, 26 confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of flaws, pollution of souls, sex perversion, disaster 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 exaltation, or prophecy lies, or live unhappily, 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, in including the commandments against murder (v. 21), adultery (v. 27), bearing 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 7:11-23 - 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, swindling, deceit, idleness, covetousness, 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."

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