

The Ten Utterances — A Structural and Ethical Reading

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The Ten Utterances, commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments, are divine words intended to be spoken (Exodus 20:1). They invite the listener to commit himself to the divine, to himself, and to his fellow human being.

The Exodus is recalled at the very outset of the Ten Utterances: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” This opening formulation gives moral obligation a historical and existential grounding: it proceeds from a foundational experience of liberation rather than from a purely normative abstraction.

Although the commandments are expressed in the second person singular — “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal” — thereby affirming the irreducible responsibility of the individual, their scope nevertheless extends beyond the personal sphere. For it is as a collective, constituted through trial and deliverance, that the people receive the Law, which is meant to unfold within the fabric of social life.

Thus, the memory of the Exodus is not merely recollection: it becomes the matrix of a shared ethical consciousness, establishing a particular vigilance toward the other, especially the vulnerable. The injunctions addressed to each individual thereby contribute to the construction of a common order in which justice and solidarity are intertwined.

What emerges is a subtle articulation between individual obligation and collective vocation: the Law addresses each person individually, yet finds its full realization in the formation of a community shaped by a history of liberation and oriented toward an ideal of justice.

Correspondences Between the Utterances

First and Sixth Utterances

“I am YHWH your Elohim ... who brought you out of Egypt” and “You shall not murder.” One must not kill the being whom the Lord created in His image.

It is the God revealed at the burning bush, during the plagues of Egypt, and at Mount Sinai, who addresses the individual in the singular — an individual who belongs to a collective that He wishes to make into “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). This means that biblical morality is rooted in an experience of liberation rather than in abstraction. The memory of the Exodus thus becomes a source of ethics, calling for particular concern toward others, especially the most vulnerable.

No other deity that would “hide His face” (‘al panay) may be worshipped in His stead.

“You shall not murder” — and not merely “You shall not kill” — forbids intentional homicide while leaving room for legitimate self-defense. Life is a divine gift, which God gives and takes away (Job 1:21). Formulated in the second person singular, these utterances stress individual responsibility. Yet they are given to a people; they therefore also aim to structure a society founded on justice and solidarity.

Second and Seventh Utterances

“You shall have no other Elohim ... for YHWH your Elohim is a jealous God” parallels the prohibition of adultery.

The prohibition against having other gods and the prohibition of adultery both arise from the same demand for absolute fidelity. The rejection of idolatry — including through images of anything in the universe intended for worship — expresses this exclusivity.

The Lord remembers, across several generations, a person’s antecedents. This does not mean punishing future generations, but rather taking antecedents into account (Deuteronomy 24:16 and Exodus 32:33).

“Showing kindness to those who love Me and keep My commandments” recalls the faithfulness of Abraham (Genesis 26:5 and Isaiah 41:8).

Third and Eighth Utterances

“You shall not invoke the name of YHWH your Elohim in support of falsehood ...” is related to “You shall not steal.”

The prohibition against invoking God’s name in support of falsehood is linked to the prohibition of theft. One must not instrumentalize the divine in order to justify oneself. Theft is not limited to a material act: it may be concealed, economic, moral (such as plagiarism), or even take the form of kidnapping. Fundamentally, everything belongs to God, who entrusts the earth to humanity (Psalms 24:1 and 115:16). Human beings are merely its custodians (Leviticus 25:23), as recalled by the laws of the Jubilee, during which land returns to its original owner and slaves are freed.

Fourth and Ninth Utterances

“Remember the Sabbath day ... the seventh day is a Sabbath unto YHWH your Elohim,” so that observance of the Sabbath bears witness to YHWH as the origin of the world, corresponds to the ninth utterance: “You shall not bear false witness.”

In the first version of the Ten Utterances (Exodus 20:10), the Sabbath is a sign commemorating Creation. In the second version (Deuteronomy 5:14), the Sabbath also recalls the Exodus from Egypt and the end of slavery. It thus becomes a living testimony to historical and spiritual truth, in opposition to falsehood.

Fifth and Tenth Utterances

“Honor your father and your mother ... so that your days may be prolonged upon the land which YHWH your Elohim gives you” corresponds to the tenth utterance: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house ... nor anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Respect for parents strengthens familial and social bonds while limiting covetousness. To honor one’s father and mother is to accord them their proper “weight” (*kabed*). Such an attitude fosters a society in which respect for others and for their possessions becomes possible. Conversely, excessive covetousness leads to the transgression of the other utterances, particularly those prohibiting murder, adultery, theft, and false testimony.

The Utterances Form a Whole

Utterances 1 through 5 concern the relationship to God and to parents — that is, to the sources of life. Utterances 6 through 10 concern human relationships: the first four prohibit acts, while the final one addresses inner intention, namely covetousness. In the second version of the Ten Utterances, the last five utterances are linked by the conjunction “and,” emphasizing that they form a coherent and indivisible whole rather than a series of independent options (Deuteronomy 5:17–18).

The Decalogue rests upon the recognition of a foundational transcendence and origin, establishing a demand for integrity that simultaneously engages one’s relationship to the divine, to oneself, and to others. Far from restricting freedom, it proposes a genuine pedagogy of freedom: by setting limits within human relationships, it prevents violence, instrumentalization, and the appropriation of the other. Moral discipline, rather than being merely restrictive, seeks to contain covetousness — an inner disposition capable of disrupting the proper social order — and to preserve the conditions for an ethical coexistence grounded in respect for life, speech, property, and social bonds.

Other Commandments

Within the Pentateuch, several fundamental commandments extend and deepen the spirit of the Ten Utterances.

Thus, the injunctions “Keep far from falsehood” (Exodus 23:7) and “You shall not lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11) further clarify their scope. The first leaves room for certain human nuances, such as the acceptable untruth that preserves domestic peace (Genesis 18:12–13); the second pertains more specifically to the legal and social sphere.

Likewise, major principles such as “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18) are grounded in the Ten Utterances. Indeed, this latter commandment alone brings together the dimensions encompassed by the Ten Utterances under the guidance of the Lord (Utterance 1): the relationship with God (Utterances 2, 3, and 4), with others (Utterances 5, 6, and 7), and with oneself (Utterances 8, 9, and 10).

In sum, the Ten Utterances propose a balanced vision: they morally engage each individual while pursuing the ideal of a community inspired by a history of liberation and oriented toward justice.

The Decalogue thus offers far more than a list of prohibitions: it outlines a way of being in the world. It connects our inner life, our relationships with others, and our relationship with that which transcends us. It is this articulation that gives it both its strength and its universality, and that continues, even today, to nourish moral reflection and communal life.

A LIVING READING OF THE DECALOGUE

In a context where moral reference points sometimes appear to be relativized, the Decalogue continues, in my view, to inspire reflection and dialogue. It offers a reading that is both structured and profoundly relevant today.

From the outset, what strikes me is its internal coherence. The Decalogue is not merely a simple series of prohibitions: it is organized into two complementary sections. The first five commandments concern the relationship between the human being and the Creator, while the last five govern human relationships. This division reveals a comprehensive vision of existence in which the spiritual and the social are intimately linked.

I am particularly sensitive to the progression of the commandments concerning human relationships. These begin with the prohibition against coveting — a rule that touches upon interiority — before extending outward toward external acts: false testimony, theft, adultery, and finally murder. This progression demonstrates that the gravest actions often originate in desires that are poorly mastered. In my view, this logic makes the Decalogue a genuine foundation of universal morality grounded in respect for others.

The first commandments, for their part, introduce a dimension of transcendence. They invite the recognition of a reality greater than the individual: fidelity to God, reverence for His name, sanctification of time, and honor toward parents. I do not perceive them solely as religious prescriptions, but as elements that structure a vision of human dignity. If life deserves respect, it is because it bears a higher dimension.

This idea finds an echo in the Book of Proverbs (20:27), where the human soul is described as a “divine spark.” Human relationships therefore rest not only upon social rules, but also upon a deeper understanding of what it means to be human.

The Decalogue also opens onto other great biblical principles, such as the call to love one’s neighbor and to turn toward God with one’s whole heart. It is therefore not a fixed text, but rather a point of departure toward a broader ethic encompassing the relationship to oneself, to others, and to transcendence.

Concretely, these commandments guide our daily choices. They remind us that life is made up of decisions — sometimes simple, sometimes more demanding — in which free will is always at stake. They invite us to recognize the dignity of every person, which implies acting with honesty and respect in our deeds, our words, and even our intentions.

If one imagines a world in which these principles were fully lived out, this would open the way to greater justice, compassion, and responsibility. They offer a framework capable of reconciling freedom with moral obligation: we are free, but that freedom is always accompanied by responsibility toward others.

Ultimately, the Decalogue appears to me as far more than a set of commandments. It proposes a genuine way of inhabiting the world, by articulating inner life, social responsibility, and spiritual elevation. The values that emerge from it, rooted in the memory of the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai, continue to illuminate contemporary moral reflection and to nourish communal life.

These ancient texts thus retain, in my eyes, a remarkably contemporary significance: they invite each person to reflect upon his or her actions, intentions, and the meaning given to life.