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# The Decalogue Predates Mount Sinai: Indicators from the Book of Genesis

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## **The Decalogue Predates Mount Sinai: Indicators from the Book of Genesis**

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A general consensus exists that the Decalogue has exerted more influence on ethics and law than any other part of Scripture, or any document outside of Scripture. In Roman Catholic moral theology, in Protestant ethics, and in Western law the Ten Commandments have been foundational for millennia. Legal codes of the Middle Ages were often prefaced with the Ten Commandments. Many commentaries have been written on the Decalogue by both Christian and Jewish authors.<sup>1</sup>

The Decalogue is the towering ethical document in Scripture. It is quoted by almost every biblical writer following the Exodus, including the psalmists,<sup>2</sup> prophets<sup>3</sup> and historians.<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament, Jesus Himself refers to the Decalogue and affirms its exalted nature.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Philo, *The Decalogue*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 320, ed. F. H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958-1962); and Thomas Aquinas, *God's Greatest Gifts: Commentaries on the Commandments and the Sacraments* (Manchester: Sophia Institutes, 1992). The Reformers continued in this same tradition: Luther, in his *Larger Catechism* and *Treatise on Good Works*; Calvin in his *institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, 8.

<sup>2</sup> “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul” (Ps 19:7).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Jeremiah: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My People” (Jer 31:33).

<sup>4</sup> One example, Ezra: “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezek 7:10).

<sup>5</sup> For example: When a young man came and asked Jesus, “what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” Jesus responded “. . . if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” The young man asked, “Which ones?” Jesus responded, “You shall

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Apostle Paul likewise speaks of the far-reaching claims of God's law. He often quotes it in his various letters and epistles.<sup>6</sup> The great apostle's cross-cultural ministry finds him instructing new Christians on how the Law's boundaries extend deeply into human thoughts and motives continuing the Old Testament tradition. The biblical canon closes with the book of Revelation and its pointed reference to those "who keep the commandments of God" (Rev. 14:12).

In light of this scriptural emphasis, one might ask: do ethical concerns in the canon commence only at Mt Sinai? Presently much confusion exists in Pentateuchal criticism, which often supposes an evolution of the Decalogue.<sup>7</sup> It is the position of this paper that a close reading of the received book of Genesis suggests that even before the Fall, Adam and Eve, in newly-created perfection, were given a *command* by God not to eat from a certain tree. We find a divine commandment *before* sin: "And the LORD God *commanded* the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *you shall not eat . . .*'" (Gen 2:16-17, emphasis added). With the presence of law before sin, we can be instructed concerning the positive protective nature of divine law.

This pre-fall restriction invites consideration. From what is God protecting Adam and Eve? Could it be subtly implying that there is a standard of right and wrong operating before Adam and Eve disobey? This

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not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and your mother . . ." (Matt 19:16-19f).

<sup>6</sup> One example: "For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things contained in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness . . . You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?" Rom 2:11-15, 21-23.

<sup>7</sup> See Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), chapter one, "The Documentary Hypothesis," (13-33) for a survey of the present discussion.

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pre-fall restriction at least suggests that the human couple needed to be protected from something.<sup>8</sup>

The content of the divine command in Genesis 2:16-17 is also significant. God first makes a positive statement to Adam and Eve: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden.”<sup>9</sup> This same feature can be seen later in the opening words of the Decalogue: “I am the LORD God who has redeemed you from slavery.” Only after this statement is the prohibition given, both in Genesis 2 and in Exodus 20. Even then, the command is not presented as an abstract ban such as “it is forbidden.” Instead, the personal pronoun is used, likewise later in the Decalogue.

The command in Genesis 2:17, “you shall not eat,” closely resembles the initial words of eight Decalogue precepts. The prohibition in Genesis 2 applies to only a single tree. Apparently Adam and Eve could “freely eat” from all other trees. Bruce Waltke is correct: “These first words of God to man assume man’s freedom to choose and thus his formed moral capacity.”<sup>10</sup>

From the very beginning, human beings had the power of choice. They were free to make genuine decisions. The divine command to them was to assist them in making the right choice, but the choice was theirs. After the Fall, in the Genesis narratives, God continues giving commandments to humans.<sup>11</sup>

**Pre-Sinai Evidence for the Decalogue Commandments**

The law given later at Mount Sinai can be seen less as a new law than as an authoritative expression of an already existing system of morality. As Terence Fretheim sensitively observes about patriarchal history: “These ancestral texts also demonstrate that law cannot be collapsed into the law given at Sinai. At the same time, they show that Sinai

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<sup>8</sup> From what is God protecting Adam and Eve? The implication includes the notion that sin is found in the universe before Adam and Eve disobey and that God seeks to protect Adam and Eve from such.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Hamilton notes: “the serpent [in Gen 3] discreetly avoids any reference to God’s generous permission but magnifies God’s prohibition, which is the reversal of these two verses.” Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17 in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 172.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 87.

<sup>11</sup> For example: of Noah it is recorded twice that “according to all that God commanded him, so he did. (Gen 6:22; 7:5); and the patriarchs are commended for obeying God’s commands (Gen 18:19; 21:4; 22:18; 26:5, emphasis added).

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law basically conforms to already existing law . . .”<sup>12</sup> In this paper we propose that intriguing hints embedded within the Genesis narratives have often been overlooked when ancient morality is reviewed. There we observe the ten precepts of the Decalogue already operant in human lives. Working within the received text,<sup>13</sup> we will review a number of examples.

**Creation/Sabbath (Gen 2:1-3).** The Sabbath appears in numerous, varied OT texts. The Pentateuch contains what is considered the earliest references to it. This day plays a prominent role in the opening chapters of Genesis at the climax of the creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a). The passage (Gen 2:1-3) reveals God finishing his creative activity in six days, after which he “rested” (*sabat*) on the “seventh day.” The seventh day is mentioned three times, marking its importance over the other previous six days.

The phonetic linkage between *sabat* and *sabbat* is generally perceived to indicate sabbath-rest because of the sabbath terminology which Genesis 2:1-3 has in common with the fourth commandment of the Decalogue: “seventh day” (vv. 2-3; Exod 20:10), “bless” (Heb *barak*, v. 3; Exod 20:11), “sanctify/make holy” (Heb *qiddas* [pi’el], v. 3; Exod 20:11; cf. 31:14), “make” (Heb *asah*, vv. 2-3; Exod 20:9-10; cf. 31:14-15).

“The ‘seventh day’ sabbath is ‘blessed’ as no other day and thereby imbued with a power unique to this day. God made this day ‘holy’ by separating it from all other days. Rest-day holiness is something God bestowed onto the seventh day. He manifested Himself in refraining from work and in rest as the divine Exemplar for humankind. The sequence of ‘six working-days’ and a ‘seventh [sabbath] rest-day’ indicates universally that every human being is to engage in an *imitatio Dei*, ‘imitation of God,’ by resting on the ‘seventh day.’ ‘Man’ (*adam*), is made in the *imago Dei*, ‘image of God,’ (Gen 1:26-28) is invited to follow the Exemplar.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 136. See also: “The character of the law of the Hebrew Bible . . . [supports] the idea of a rational, knowable, accessible foundation for moral judgments that was, at least in principle, available to all humanity” (Barr, *Biblical Faith*, 100).

<sup>13</sup> Dating of the Pentateuch is broadly historical and chronological, as argued by Duane Garrett.

<sup>14</sup> Gerhard F. Hasel, “Sabbath,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, editor-in-chief (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:851. When the Sabbath is

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The creation week cycle is later again grounded by God in the fourth commandment of the Decalogue.

The weekly cycle is also incidentally mentioned functioning within the Flood narratives (Gen 7:10; 8:10, 12).

**Cain and Abel/Worship of God (Gen 4:3-4).** Cain and Abel are found in worship outside the Garden of Eden. The brothers' actions reveal a knowledge of divine worship and involve time. Verse 3, often translated "in the course of time" (NASB); "in the process of time" (NKJV), reads literally "at the end of days." The only time frame given in Genesis so far is the weekly cycle set in place in Genesis 1 and 2. Thus "the end of days" in Genesis 4:3 could imply the end of the week, or the seventh-day Sabbath. Though sin has resulted in preventing direct contact with God as occurred in the Garden before sin, God has not broken off contact with the human beings. "Eden is off-limits to humanity, but God is not restricted to Eden's compound."<sup>15</sup>

How the brothers were instructed regarding the worship of God, the reader is not informed. Yet it is apparent that knowledge of and means of this worship is known.<sup>16</sup>

**Cain/Murder and Lying (Gen 4:3-16).** This narrative is a tragic account of sin's rapid degradation of human nature. Long before the commandment against murder was proclaimed from Mount Sinai, Cain kills his brother Abel. This horrifying deed is obviously stressed, for the word "brother" is repeated over and over in the passage. When God addresses Cain, he cites this relationship three times in three verses alone (vv. 9-11). Within Gen 4:1-17, "Abel" and "brother" occur seven times. All of

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accented in the wilderness wanderings before Sinai, it is clear that it is not being introduced as something new (Exod 16:28).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>16</sup> Victor Hamilton suggests three chiastic sentences in Gen 3:2-5, highlighting the contrasts between the offerings of the two brothers:

**A** and became **Abel** a keeper of **flocks**

**A'** and **Cain** became a **tiller** of the soil

**B** and brought **Cain** from the fruit of the soil . . .

**B'** and **Abel** brought, also he, from the firstlings . . .

**C** and looked favorably Yahweh on **Abel and his offering**

**C'** and on **Cain and his offering** he did not look favorably

See F. I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew*, 122 [Davidson emphasis]; Hamilton, 219.

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these repetitions jar the reader's attention to the heinous nature of the crime.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of this grievous murder, Cain (as was the serpent in Gen 3) "is placed under a curse. This is the first occasion in Scripture where a human is cursed, indicating the gravity of his crime against God and creation."<sup>18</sup> Gordon Wenham sensitively notes that the overall pattern of this Genesis 4 narrative is unmistakably similar to the account of the Fall in Genesis 3, with the scenes closely parallel:

1. The central scene in each chapter is a terse description of the sin (3:6-8//4:8) that contrasts strikingly with long dialogues before and afterwards.

2. The following scene in each case where God investigates and condemns the sin is also remarkably alike: cf. "Where is Abel your brother?/" "Where are you?" 4:9; "What have you done? 3:9; 4:10; 3:13; "You are cursed from the land,"/"You are more cursed than all domesticated animals; The land is cursed because of you" 4:11; 3:14,17.

3. Both stories conclude with the transgressors leaving the presence of God and going to live east of Eden (4:16; cf. 3:24).

4. In Genesis 3:24, the LORD "drove man out of the garden." Cain's complaint is similar: "You have driven me from the surface of the land" (4:14).

These parallels between Genesis 3 and 4 suggest that the two narratives should be compared to give insight into the nature of human sin.

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Hauser elaborates: "It is not a foe, a stranger, or even a friend that Cain will kill, but his own flesh and blood. . . . Significantly, 'his brother' is applied never to Cain but always to Abel. In fact after v 7 Abel's name is never used without the accompanying 'his brother,' and the last three times the victim is mentioned we have only 'his brother' (vv 9b-11). The writer places so much stress on the fact that Abel is Cain's 'brother' because he wants to emphasize the violent and heinous nature of the act. Indeed the repetition of 'his brother' builds up like a crescendo, burning the deed into the mind of the reader." Alan J. Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links Between Genesis 4:1-16 and Genesis 2-3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23/4 (1980): 300.

<sup>18</sup> So writes Kenneth Matthews, who continues: "Cain's culpability is emphasized by the direct accusation "from your [own] hand." The language "you are under a curse" is the same as the oracle delivered against the serpent: "Cursed are you above [*min*] all the livestock" (3:14) is parallel to "cursed are you from [*min*] the ground" (4:11). This linkage shows that like father like "seed," both the serpent and Cain are murderers who receive the same retribution. Because Cain has polluted the ground with innocent blood, he is "driven" from it as his parents were from the garden (3:24)." Kenneth A. Matthews, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Genesis 1-11:26 in The New American Commentary New International Version*, E. Ray Clendenen, gen. ed. ([n.p.]: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 275.

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Fratricide graphically illustrates the defilement of sin. For example, in chapter 3, Eve has to be persuaded to disregard the Creator's advice by the serpent (3:1-5), whereas Cain is not dissuaded from his murderous intention by God's direct appeal (4:6-7). In chapter 3 there is no stark sense of alienation between Adam and Eve with God immediately. When God pronounces sentence on Adam, Eve, and the serpent, they accept it without demurring (3:14-20). Cain's negative attitude is perceptible from the outset when the LORD does not accept his sacrifice.

Clearly the writer of Genesis wants to mark parallels between the two narratives. However, the murder of Abel is not simply a rerun of the fall. There is further debasement. Sin's vicious nature is more graphically demonstrated and humanity is further alienated from God.<sup>19</sup> Genesis narratives proceed with deliberate linkages showing the curse of sin rapidly developing a deadly hold upon the human race. Human nature is now bent toward evil. Wenham is right: "Human beings should know what an octopus fastened its tentacles upon the race when sin took hold. With terrible realism the narrative continues."<sup>20</sup>

The Decalogue prohibition against murder has not yet been given. However, in Genesis 4, after the murder of Abel, God confronts Cain as a prosecutor and makes serious accusation. Cain is liable for shedding blood. A person cannot take another's life with impunity. Significantly, Cain himself is aware that murder is wrong. What is more, in addition to murdering his brother, Cain lies.

Retributive justice is not set in motion with the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus. It is already operant after this first tragic murder. Cain himself acknowledges his guilt and does not complain that God is too harsh toward him. He is only worried that other people might treat him unfairly.

The Genesis 4 narrative of Cain's murder of his brother also reveals and underscores the sacredness of human life in God's eyes. It is this same affirmation of life that is implied later in the sixth commandment of the Decalogue, which forbids murder. Moreover, the great anger of Cain, which the text describes ("So Cain was exceedingly angry, and his countenance fell" [Gen 4:5]), is an advance presentation of the principle Jesus

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<sup>19</sup> Adapted from Gordon J. Wenham: *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, David A. Hubbard & Glenn W. Barker, gen. ed. (Waco: Word, 1987), 98-100. Derek Kidner concurs: "Eve had been talked into her sin, Cain will not . . . confess to it, nor yet accept his punishment." Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, D. J. Wiseman, gen. ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1967), 74.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *ibid.*, 100.



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much later elucidates in His Sermon on the Mount, equating anger in the heart to murder.

**Lamech/Bigamy and Murder (Gen 4:19-24).** “Lamech took for himself two wives . . .” (Gen 4:19) He deliberately diverts from the divine ideal for marriage in Gen 2:24, the “echad” of one husband and one wife. The eighth commandment of the Decalogue forbidding adultery implies this same sacred view of monogamous marriage.

Lamech also brags of his murdering a person for wounding him, blatantly referring to Cain’s murder and his subsequent divine sentencing (Gen 4:23). “Lamech’s gloating over a reputation more ruthless than infamous Cain’s shows the disparagement of human life among Cain’s seed that was fostered by his murder of Abel.”<sup>21</sup>

In the literary structuring of Genesis, the genealogy of Cain, climaxing with Lamech, is juxtaposed against the genealogy of Adam/Seth, climaxing in righteous Enoch, who was translated without seeing death (Gen 4:16-24,26). This pairing makes the degradation caused by sin all the more glaringly obvious.

**Descendants of Seth/God’s Name (Gen 4:26).** All through Scripture, the name of God is declared holy: For example:

The Lord reigns; let the people tremble. He dwells between the cherubim; let the earth be moved. The Lord is great in Zion; He is high above all the peoples. Let them praise *His great and awesome name*; He is holy. (Ps 99:1-3, emphasis added)

Long before Mount Sinai’s command to honor God’s name, people exalted it: “men began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen 4:26). The command to honor God’s sacred name will later be enshrined in the third of the ten commandments.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mathews, 289. He continues: “God’s promise to avenge Cain’s life ‘seven times’ (v. 15) is interpreted by Lamech as a badge of honor for Cain rather than as a merciful provision by God for a shameful criminal (v. 24).” Derek Kidner expresses similar sentiments: “Lamech’s taunt-song reveals the swift progress of sin. Where Cain had succumbed to it (7) Lamech exults in it; where Cain had sought protection (14, 15) Lamech looks round for provocation: the savage disproportion of killing a mere led (Hebrew *yeled*, ‘child’) for a mere wound is the whole point of his boast (*cf.* 24)” (78).

<sup>22</sup> Textual linkages of Genesis narratives are assumed valid in this study. Mathews makes an interesting point: “Internally 4:1-26 also possesses evidence of cohesion. (1) The birth announcements at the three seams of the chapter have similar language (e.g., “lay with his wife,” vv. 1, 17, 25). (2) The narrative is built on the numerical congruity of sevens and multiples of seven: the emphatic “seven” for Cain (v. 15) and Lamech (v. 24);

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**Antediluvians/Morality (Gen 6:5,11-13).** The divine reason for the Flood implies that a standard of morality was being violated:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. . . . The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. (Gen 6:5,11-13)

The phrase “the Lord saw” (v. 5) links with the creation story (1:31, “and God saw”) in a startling manner. Human evil is now presented even more graphically with biting force through the inclusive words “every . . . only . . . continually (6:5).” “A more emphatic statement of the wickedness of the human heart is hardly conceivable.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, all of life is linked

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“brother” is found seven times, “Cain,” fourteen, and “Seth,” seven; the divine names of “God,” “LORD God,” and “LORD” together in 2:4-4:26 occur thirty-five times (5 x 7), equaling the same number “God” appears in 1:1-23, and the seventieth (10 x 7) occasion of deity’s name in Genesis is at 4:26b when men called on the “name of the LORD” (262). He also rightly notes: “At this time people ‘began to call on the name of the LORD’ (v. 26b). This concluding remark to the *toledot* section (2:4-4:26) serves as a linkage with the following genealogy, which formally presents Adam’s lineage through Seth down to the flood survivor, Noah (5:1-32). . . . ‘Called on the name of the LORD’ in 4:26b unites the Lord of the patriarchs and of Moses with the Lord of the antediluvian line of promise through Seth and shows thereby that the spiritual ancestors of Abraham’s family were those descended through Noah, the survivor of the flood’s purge. . . . This final note in the *toledot* section of 2:4-4:26 offers at last a bright spot among the dim accounts of sin and death that have dominated the garden story” (262; 291-292).

<sup>23</sup> Derek Kidner writes: “In verse 5, the expression *the Lord saw* invites bitter comparison with the creation story, 1:31. In the two halves of the verse man’s evil is presented extensively and intensively, the latter with devastating force in the word every . . . only . . . continually. ‘A more emphatic statement of the wickedness of the human heart is hardly conceivable.’ [citing Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Blackwell, 1960), 210] (78).

Kenneth Mathews elaborates further: “This horrid paragraph [Gen 6:5-8] is an expose on the degeneracy of the human heart. Collectively, society has decayed beyond recovery in God’s estimation. The progression in this small cluster of verses is arresting: “The LORD saw . . . The LORD grieved . . . The LORD said. . . . The justification for the calamity is the complete moral corruption of the human family and the defilement of the earth (cf. 6:6-7). The repetition of ‘corrupt,’ occurring in vv. 11-12, underscores God’s appraisal of the human condition (6:5) and proves the legitimacy of the extreme penalty he will invoke. ‘Earth’ also occurs three times in the passage, indicating that the fortunes of humanity and the earth are intertwined. This ‘corruption’ is further defined by the term ‘violence’ (*hamas*, v. 11) . . .” (339; 359).

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together, for all living creatures share the same deliverance or divine death sentence.

After the Flood, God gives another injunction against murder: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind” (Gen 9:5-6). This statement of God is precise, again underscoring the sacredness of life with grave consequences for its wanton destruction. The divinely pronounced principle declares that destroying human life is an offense against the Creator. The text speaks of human beings being made in the very image of God, strikingly linking to the transcendent value of life announced creation week (Gen 1:26-27). The divine image is still acknowledged in post-Flood sinful humans by God, explicitly linking post-Flood humanity to Adam.

Punishment for spilling the lifeblood of another human being is exacted by God. Twice it is mentioned in just two verses that God demands recompense for murder. This divine statement in Genesis 9:5-6 is addressed to humanity, long before the people of Israel are in existence. Retributive justice does not commence in the Mosaic Covenant. We find it here in the Divine Covenant with Noah, already operating since the first murder in Gen. 4, as we have seen above.

**Noah and His Sons/Filial Irreverence and Sexual Perversion (Gen 9:20-27).** This incident involves sexual irregularity connected with drunkenness.<sup>24</sup> The Hebrew *ra’a* here means “to look at (searchingly)” (Song 1:6; 6:11b) and is not describing an innocent or accidental action. Ham’s “voyeurism” is of the worst sort, as the prophet Habakkuk later insists:

Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbor, pressing him to  
your bottle even to make him drunk that you may look upon  
his nakedness! You are filled with shame instead of glory . . .  
(Hab 2:15,16a)

A discussion continues among scholars regarding the exact nature of the act of Ham, but all agree that sexual perversion is apparent, as is filial irreverence.

In contrast to the terse brevity with which Ham’s deed is described, the response of the two brothers, Shem and Japhet, is detailed. The narrative slows when the other two brothers refrain from further impropriety.

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<sup>24</sup> Derek Kidner speaks of the “loss of decency and honour which marks this first biblical story of strong drink . . .” (103).

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Notice how it is said twice that they went “backwards,” and that they covered and did not see “their father’s nakedness.” The fifth commandment of honoring a parent is apparently operant long before the pronouncement of it from Mount Sinai.<sup>25</sup> Also, the standard of sexual purity of the seventh commandment is implied.

**Tower of Babel/Making a “Name” (Gen 11:1-9).** This narrative is linked to Gen 4:26’s description of “calling on the name of the Lord”: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, . . . they said to one another . . . “*let us make a name for ourselves . . .*” (Gen 11:4, emphasis added) The motive of the Babel builders was to achieve independence from God, implying a blatant snub of the divine. Though created in God’s image, they wanted to divorce from that fundamental connection. The “name of God” later upheld in the third commandment of the Decalogue was deliberately disregarded.

Human desire to be autonomous is as ancient as human civilization, as even a casual perusal of history would suggest. Interestingly, the Babel builders were successful in making a name for themselves. However, its lasting sense is derogatory. The term “Babel” is still synonymous with confusion, as occasional media comments hint.

**Lot and His Daughters/Sexual Deviancy (Gen 19:1-38).** The moral compass of Lot and his daughters is very confused. We find lurid sexual perversion in their lives. The horrible depth of vice in Sodom is indicated by “young men and old” (Hebrew: “from young to old”) showing up at Lot’s house, revealing inter-generational corruption. The enormity of their sin is also indicated by the fact that the sacred duty of hospitality was so completely distorted by them that Lot’s *guests* were demanded for abuse, even though Lot urges them not to do “this wicked thing” (Gen 19:7).<sup>26</sup>

This narrative’s events display shocking depravity. Lot does not protect his daughters but offers them to inflamed men. His “hospitality” reflects moral confusion.<sup>27</sup> Later, these daughters will sexually abuse their

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<sup>25</sup> “It is the obverse of the fifth commandment . . .” Kidner, *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> “The sin of Sodom’s act is presumably the worst sort of sexual offense: homosexual gang rape (cf. Judg 19; Jude 7)” (Waltke, 276).

<sup>27</sup> Kidner comments: “That a virtue can be inflated into a vice is glaringly plain here, for Lot’s courage in going out to the mob proves his sincerity. . . . It suggests that in any age human conventions will be a most fallible guide. Doing his best, Lot has jeopardized his daughters, enraged his townsmen, and finally required rescue by those he was

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father. The last picture of Lot, nephew of noble Abraham, is embedded in incest. Derek Kidner details the bleak picture:

The end of choosing to carve out his career was to lose even the custody of his body. His legacy, Moab and Ammon (37f.), was destined to provide the worst carnal seduction in the history of Israel (that of Baal-Peor, Num 25) and the cruellest religious perversion (that of Molech, Lev. 18:21). So much stemmed from a self-regarding choice (13:10f.) and persistence in it.<sup>28</sup>

Kenneth Mathews describes this Genesis 19 narrative as involving “a web of the most vile circumstances.”<sup>29</sup> Another example of not honoring parents is apparent in these verses, along with issues of “not committing adultery.”

**Abraham/Divine Worship (Gen 22:5; 24:26,48,52).** Though surrounded by pagan polytheistic nations, the Genesis narratives of Abraham picture him faithfully worshiping the one true God.<sup>30</sup> His godly influence obviously spread throughout his household, for even his servants testify to their faith in the true God. When on his journey to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham’s trusted servant describes how God answered his prayer for guidance:

And I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham, who had led me in the way of truth to take the daughter of my master’s brother for his son. (Gen 24:48)

In fact, Genesis 24 records this servant worshiping God three times!

**Abimelech, Pharaoh, Abraham and Isaac/Adultery and Lying (Gen 12, 20, 26).** Fundamental Decalogue principles are also seen operant beyond the Covenant line. God’s standard of righteousness is the same within the nations through which the patriarchs travel. The three

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trying to protect. The angels’ visit has shattered the uneasy peace in which he has lived too long” (134).

<sup>28</sup> Kidner, *ibid.*, 136.

<sup>29</sup> Mathews, 237. Kidner also notes: “At this early point in Scripture the sin of sodomy is branded as particularly heinous” (134).

<sup>30</sup> For example: “And he went on his journey from the South as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there at first. And there Abram called on the name of the LORD” (Gen 13:3-4).

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“adultery narratives” of Gen 12, 20 and 26 involve three different places and rulers. In Gen 20, King Abimelech finds out about Abraham and Sarah’s marriage from a dream. He pleads his innocence to God because he was unaware of any existing marital relation between Abraham and Sarah. Open to divine instruction, this ruler displays a moral conscience superior to Abraham’s.<sup>31</sup>

Later, Isaac finds himself in a situation very similar to the one his father had been in two times. Like his father, Isaac bore “false witness,” involving the ninth commandment of the future-presented Decalogue. When confronted with his lie, Isaac admits that he had been afraid that men might have put him to death on Rebekah’s account. The pagan king scolds Isaac’s prevarication regarding his relationship with Rebekah. This ruler, though not of the covenant line, recognizes that adultery involves “guilt.” He insists, “she is your wife” (Gen 26:9).

Abimelech then administers a well-deserved rebuke to Isaac: “. . . and you would have brought upon us retribution” (v. 10). In attempting to spare his own life through deception, Isaac was risking the lives of everyone else.<sup>32</sup> Remarkably, Abimelech understands this principle when he makes the above statement. It is not only the immoral behavior that concerns him, but also the consequences of that behavior. Strikingly, “outsiders” of the Covenant line in Genesis are sensitive to precepts of the Sinai Decalogue (e.g., Egyptians, Canaanites, Aramaeans). Terence Fretheim is correct:

This functioning of law is also evident in the treatment of other characters and their activities throughout Genesis 12-50 . . . the oughts are presented as an organic [or creational] ethic by means of creational motifs that are embedded in the narrative . . . woven into the foundations of human experience.<sup>33</sup>

**Rebekah’s Deception and Jacob’s Lies (Gen 27); Laban’s Lies (29:21-26).** The deceptive conversations are included in each narrative,

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<sup>31</sup> As Gerald Janzen notes: “In this encounter between Abimelech and God, then, we have a remarkable picture of moral sensitivity and responsiveness on the part of a city-state king. Unlike the later pharaoh of the Exodus, when God’s word comes to Abimelech he responds in repentance and the fear of God (v. 8).” J. Gerald Janzen, *A Commentary on the Book Genesis 12-50: Abraham and All the Families of the Earth* (Eerdmans, 2003), 69.

<sup>32</sup> Just as Achan’s sin later brings divine wrath upon all Israel (Josh 7:1).

<sup>33</sup> Fretheim, 99.

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Rebekah with her son Jacob, Jacob with his father Isaac, and later Laban with Jacob. The deceiver of his father was subsequently deceived by his father-in-law. On the first occasion, Jacob understands that his mother's plan would be a deception: "Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, 'Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a *deceiver* in his sight . . .'" (Gen 27:11-12, emphasis added).

When in the presence of Isaac, Jacob utters two lies.

First, he claims to be Esau, and for good measure he adds *your firstborn*. This phrase will remind Isaac why father and son are getting together on this occasion. Second, he claims to have captured the game and now wants to share that with Isaac. He also reminds his father that he is there for his father's blessing, not just for some food and a chat. . . . The low point in Jacob's conversation with his father is his statement that he is back so quickly because God just put the game in front of him. Here is an appeal to deity in order to cover up duplicity.<sup>34</sup>

When Esau learns of what has happened, he expresses how he regards Jacob's prevarication: "Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (Gen 27:36).

His anger is so great that he plans a revenge murder of his brother:

So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, "the days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob." (Gen 27:41)

Later, Laban exercises treachery on Jacob, dealing fraudulently with his daughter Rachel promised to Jacob after seven years of service (Gen 29:1-28). Jacob demands an answer from Laban: "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you *deceived* me?" (Gen 29:25, emphasis added).<sup>35</sup>

**Rahel/Stealing** (Gen 31): "Rachel *stole* her father's household gods" when Jacob determined to leave Laban's employment (Gen 31:19, emphasis added). Laban eventually caught up with the fleeing family and

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<sup>34</sup> Hamilton, 219-220.

<sup>35</sup> "As Jacob took advantage of his father's blindness to deceive him, so Laban uses the cover of night to outwit Jacob" (Waltke, 405). Esau uses the same word [*rama*] to describe Jacob's deceit as Jacob does to Laban.

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inquires of Jacob: “Why did you *steal* my gods?” (v. 30, emphasis added). The narrator mentions that “Jacob did not know that Rachel had *stolen* the gods.” (v. 32, emphasis added). Jacob defends his innocence, which implies that he knew stealing would be wrong. Rachel’s act of stealing is portrayed in the narrative as a wrongful act. However, the eighth commandment of the Decalogue is yet to be proclaimed from Mount Sinai.

**Shechem, Hamor, Simeon and Levi/Coveting, Rape, Murder, Lying (Gen 34).** Shechem, a determined young man, does not politely address his father when expressing his emphatic desire for Dinah.<sup>36</sup> Shechem will not allow anything to deter his compulsion for Dinah, and he is seen coveting what is not rightfully his. He takes matters into his own hands and abducts Dinah (“seized her,” v. 2b and v. 26). The verb sequence “saw . . . took” used of Shechem’s treatment of Dinah is the same sequence used for the sexually unrestrained in Genesis 6:2, which then leads directly to the Flood narrative.

Dinah’s brothers are furious, filled with grief and fury, because Shechem had done a disgraceful thing.<sup>37</sup> Their word for the “infamous deed” (*nʾbala*) is an expression for the most serious kind of sexual depravity.<sup>38</sup> Their insistence that “such a thing ought not to be done” suggests they believed that inviolable norms had been breached (2 Sam 13:12).

Neither Hamor nor Shechem admit that anything wrong has been done. They both hope that a monetary payment may help smooth over the situation. Hamor even tries to paint an appealing picture of the advantages Jacob might accrue with such an arrangement.

However, Simeon and Levi (“full brothers of Dinah” v. 25), recoil from the sexual disgrace of their sister (“a thing that should not be done,” v. 6). They suggest an alternative. The brothers then add deceit (which involves the ninth commandment of the Decalogue) to the complex situation. Next they commit murder, breaking the future-proclaimed sixth commandment of the Ten Commandments. When defending their actions to Jacob, Simeon and Levi argue, “should our sister be treated like a harlot?”

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<sup>36</sup> Similar to Samson’s demand of his parents in Judg 14:2 (cf. 34:8).

<sup>37</sup> Similarly, David was rightly furious when Amnon raped Tamar (2 Sam 13:21). And Absalom, like Jacob’s sons, was also angry for his own sister.

<sup>38</sup> Other uses in the OT (Judg 19:23f; 20:6; cf. Exod 22:2) reveal that this kind of act involves a desecration before God.



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However, the very last word on this narrative comes later from Jacob on his deathbed: “[speaking of Simeon and Levi] Cursed be their anger” (Gen 49:5-7). Jacob gives voice to the much later NT Sermon on the Mount’s explicit link of anger and murder. Genesis 34 paints a portrait of grim violence including rape, deceit, and massacre resulting from wrongful coveting.

**Jacob/Idols (Gen 35:1-4).** When Jacob hears God’s call to return to Bethel, he feels a need for repentance and revival in his household. Thus he urges the family to put away their idols. Why was this part of Jacob’s response? The prohibition against idol worship in the Decalogue will be announced on Mount Sinai only much later.

**Joseph and His Brothers/Threat of Murder and Lying (Gen 39-50).** Jacob’s sons first suggest that they might murder their brother Joseph (“let’s kill him” [Gen 37:20]), but instead sell him to the Ishmaelites, then lie to their father about what happened to Joseph. The guilt they bear over this weighs heavily on them for years. This becomes evident later, when the brothers travel to Egypt because of a famine. Eventually they learn of Joseph’s high position. This constrains them to confess their long-lasting feelings of guilt and their lying several times:

1. Judah, when appealing to Joseph to allow Benjamin to return to his father: “Your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons; and the one went out from me, and I said, ‘surely he is torn in pieces,’ and I have not seen him since. . . .’” (Gen 44:27-28);

2. Later, after burying their father Jacob: “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘what if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!’ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father charged before he died, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph, “Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.” And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father’” (Gen 50:15-17).

Though the proclamation of the Decalogue from Sinai is yet far in the future, Joseph’s brothers’ consciences are obviously pricked regarding their falsehoods to their father and their treatment of their brother.

**Potiphar’s Wife and Joseph/Adultery (Gen 39).** The seventh of the Ten Commandments, regarding adultery, was apparently already part of Joseph’s morality when he was in Egypt. The narrative paints a vivid picture of a faithless wife who turns on a young man because he refuses her improper advances. Joseph’s answer to Potiphar’s wife’s seduction is specific: Potiphar, his master, has bestowed unlimited confidence on

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him. The baseness of betraying such trust would be wrong.<sup>39</sup> Next, Joseph emphasizes that she is withheld from him for she is a married woman, Potiphar's wife. Most importantly, such an adulterous act would be a "great evil" and a "sin against God." Joseph's detailed argument also implies that Potiphar's wife can and should understand him.

However, she is not deterred by any of Joseph's considerations. Nor is her seduction a one-time enticement. "Day by day" (Hebrew: *yom yom*) she approaches him.<sup>40</sup> Apparently she is so persistent that Joseph takes the precaution of staying away from her (Gen 39:10).

With one encounter, Joseph realized that the situation called for drastic action, for Potiphar's wife "caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me.' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled outside (*chut-zah*—"to the street").<sup>41</sup> To divert suspicion from her to Joseph, Potiphar's wife goes on the offensive to the household servants by raising an outcry and protesting her "innocence."

Her immoral passion for Joseph is now replaced with lying. Joseph's garment, which she holds, could be substantial evidence for her. She repeats what Joseph did and what she did, but cleverly reverses the order. The narrative has portrayed Joseph leaving his coat in her hand and fleeing outdoors (v. 12), and then Potiphar's wife shouting for help (v. 14). When Potiphar's wife retells this incident, she first mentions her screaming. Then she describes Joseph's leaving his cloak behind in his rapid exit (v. 15). Her clever reversal thereby depicts her as a "victim," underscoring the blatant nature of her lie. Moreover:

In relating Joseph's alleged misconduct to her servants, she identified Joseph as "a Hebrew fellow" (v. 14). In speaking to her husband, she identifies Joseph as *the Hebrew slave* (v. 17). Joseph has been shifted from an *is* to an *ebed*. The change is certainly deliberate. To be sexually attacked by an *is* is bad

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<sup>39</sup> Derek Kidner elaborates: "Joseph's reasons for refusal (vv. 8, 9) were those that another man might have given for yielding, so neutral is the force of circumstances. His freedom from supervision and his rapid promotion, which have corrupted other stewards (*cf.* Is. 22:15-25; Lk. 16:1ff.), and his realization that one realm only (v. 9) was barred to him (which others, from Eve onwards, have construed as a frustration) were all arguments to him for loyalty. By giving the proposition its right name of *wickedness* (v. 9) he made truth his ally . . ." (190).

<sup>40</sup> This kind of persistence Samson later unfortunately could not resist (Judg 14:17; 16:16).

<sup>41</sup> This is the second time Joseph loses a piece of clothing, both times of which lead to extreme difficulty for him.

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enough. To be sexually attacked by a foreign slave makes her accusation all the more damning. In choosing this term, she is putting Joseph in as despicable a light as possible. It should also demand as swift a redress as possible from Potiphar, the master who has been betrayed by his servant.<sup>42</sup>

She also cleverly attaches “secondary blame to her own husband. After all, it is Potiphar who brought Joseph into the household.”<sup>43</sup>

**Conclusion**

All ten precepts of the Sinai Decalogue are attested to throughout the Genesis narratives:

1. “You shall have no other gods before Me” (monotheism): Creation Week; Gen 2:1-3; 4:3,26; 12:1-3; 22:5; 24:48.
2. “You shall not make . . . any carved image . . . nor bow down to them . . .”: Jacob urging family to put away idols (Gen 35:2).
3. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain . . .”: “calling on the ‘name of the Lord’” (Gen 4:26).
4. “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy . . . the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God . . .”: Creation Week; Cain and Abel’s worship time; weekly cycle operating (Gen 2:1-3; 4:3; 7:4,10; 8:10,12).
5. “Honor your father and mother . . .”: (Noah/his sons; Lot/his daughters (Gen 9:20-27; 19:1-38).
6. “You shall not kill”: Cain kills Abel and is held accountable by God; Lamech bragging of murder; Simeon and Levi killing (Gen 4:3-15; 4:23-24; 34).
7. “You shall not commit adultery”: Abraham/Sarah/Pharaoh; Lot/his daughters; Abraham/Sarah/Abimelech; Isaac/Rebekah/Abimelech; Joseph/Potiphar’s wife (Gen 12:9-20; 19:30-38; 20:1-7; 26:6-11; 39:7-21).
8. “You shall not steal”: Rachel steals idols (Gen 31:13-42).
9. “You shall not bear false witness”: Abraham/Sarah/Pharaoh; Abraham/Sarah/Abimelech; Isaac/Rebekah/Abimelech; Jacob/Esau/Leah; Laban/Leah and Rachel/Jacob; Dinah incident; Joseph/Potiphar’s wife (Gen 12:9-20; 20:1-7; 26:6-11; 27; 29; 34:13-27; 39).
10. “You shall not covet”: Dinah/Shechem; Joseph/Potiphar’s wife (Gen 34:1-4; 39).

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<sup>42</sup> Hamilton, 469.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 468.

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In light of these many Genesis indicators exhibiting the morality encoded later in the Decalogue, the commendation of Abraham given by God to Isaac is especially impressive:

I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham . . . because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Gen 26:5, emphasis added)

John Sailhamer is sensitive to the vocabulary of this statement: “These terms are well-known from the pages of Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut 11:1; 26:17), where they are the stock vocabulary for describing the keeping of the Torah revealed at Sinai.”<sup>44</sup> This explicitly detailed statement of God “witnesses to the place of law in the pre-Sinai period and that the law given at Sinai stands in fundamental continuity with the law obeyed by Abraham.”<sup>45</sup> God could have merely stated to Isaac that Abraham had been obedient. Instead He becomes very precise, mentioning specifically what Abraham had been obedient to.

Genesis does not record how human beings were provided with God’s laws, commandments, and statutes. But they are specifically mentioned here (Gen 26:5), implying that knowledge of them was in place.<sup>46</sup> By these selective terms, the Pentateuch’s author indicates that divine

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<sup>44</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 148.

<sup>45</sup> Fretheim, 136.

<sup>46</sup> Strikingly, God again becomes this specific in Exod 16:28, when chiding Israel for not observing His Law, though they had not yet gotten to Sinai: “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?” (Exod 16:28). Some of the children of Israel had gone out to gather manna on the seventh day, disregarding the directives of Moses: “Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none” (Exod 16:26).

The Sabbath, given at Creation, is implied even before the manna miracle in the wilderness. Notice when Pharaoh prods Moses and Aaron: “And the king of Egypt said to them, ‘Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people from their work? Get back to your labor.’ And Pharaoh said, ‘Look, the people of the land are many now, and you make them rest from their labor!’” (Exod 5:5, emphasis added). Though there are other words for “rest” in Hebrew, Pharaoh uses a *hapax legomenon* with the “Shabbat” root. This suggests that Pharaoh realizes that his slaves were somehow acknowledging the seventh day.

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“laws, commandments, and statutes” undergird morality in the patriarchal period.<sup>47</sup> And this morality is identical to that of the Decalogue.

There is another witness during the pre-Mosaic patriarchal period. Job’s personal testimony of morality also involves Decalogue principles. His language is clear:

I have made a covenant with my eyes: how then could I look upon a virgin? What would be my portion from God above and my heritage from the almighty on high? . . . Does He not see my ways, and number all my steps? If I have walked with falsehood, and my foot has hurried to deceit—let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity! . . . If my heart has been enticed by a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbor’s door; . . . If I have made gold my trust, or called fine gold my confidence . . . and my heart has been secretly enticed . . . this also would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges, for I should have been false to God above . . . If I have concealed my transgressions as others do, by hiding my iniquity in my bosom, because I stood in great fear of the multitude . . . If my land has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together; if I have eaten its yield without payment, and caused the death of its owners . . .” (Job 31:1-34, quoted here selectively)

This passage yields a striking moral sensitivity. And if this is the oldest book in the Bible (which the details of the text itself seem to corroborate),<sup>48</sup> the principles by which Job’s conscience operates also reflect advanced knowledge of the much-later-presented Sinai decalogue. And Job is not even of the Covenant Line.

A close reading of the book of Genesis suggests that the precepts of the Decalogue were the standard of human morality long before Sinai. We have surveyed implicit acknowledgments of all ten. The dramatic, majestic, overwhelming presentation of the Ten Commandments to the

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<sup>47</sup> Higher criticism has been unable to appreciate these precise indicators in Genesis, thinking that the ancient peoples were incapable of such advanced thinking. Critics argue that these specific terms come from another source and claim to discern traces of a later redactor.

<sup>48</sup> Job’s morning and evening sacrificial worship plus the offering of sacrifice by the head of the family rather than by an official priesthood would be pre-Mosaic; use of “El Shaddai” as God’s name and the list of flocks Job owns are the same as given for the patriarchs. The Great Exodus, subsequently mentioned by the many different Bible writers, is never alluded to. Cf. Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 456-462.

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Israelites at Mt Sinai, rather than being an initial presentation of them, instead underscores the flaming emphasis God attaches to the Moral Law, His eternal code of righteousness. Rather than granting Israel a new code of ethics, the Genesis narratives instead give evidence that the Decalogue morality predates Sinai. Thus, their expression on Sinai suggests that God purposed to make the occasion of speaking His law on Sinai a scene of awful grandeur because of the exalted character of the Law. No wonder the psalmist was moved to chant:

Forever, O LORD,  
Your word is settled in heaven. . . .  
Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,  
And Your Law is Truth . . .  
Oh, how I love Your Law. (Ps 119:89,142,97)

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