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# The Decalogue Before Mount Sinai

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# THE DECALOGUE BEFORE MOUNT SINAI

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**God's divinely inspired user's guide  
for human interaction didn't originate with  
those two stone tablets.**

General consensus indicates 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.

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

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*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. Of Noah it is recorded twice.*

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Apostle Paul likewise speaks of the far-reaching claims of God's law, often quoting it in his various letters and epistles. The great apostle's cross-cultural ministry finds him instructing new Christians on how the Law's boundaries extend deeply into human thought. And the biblical canon closes with the Book of Revelation and its pointed reference to those "who keep the commandments of God" (Rev. 14:12, NKJV).<sup>1</sup>

Given this scriptural emphasis, one might wonder whether ethical concerns in the canon began at Mt Sinai. Presently there is much confusion Pentateuchal criticism, which often supposes an evolution of the Decalogue.

But a close reading of the 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: "The Lord God *commanded* the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil *you shall not eat*" (Gen. 2:16, 17, italics supplied). The presence of law before sin suggests the positive protective nature of divine law.

This pre-Fall restriction deserves thought. 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 pre-Fall restriction at least suggests that the human couple needed to be protected from something. The implication includes the notion that sin was found in the universe before Adam and Eve disobey and that God sought to protect Adam and Eve from such.

The content of the divine command in Genesis 2:16, 17 is also significant. God first makes a positive statement to Adam and Eve: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat" (vs. 16).

This same feature can be seen later in the opening words of the Decalogue: "I am the Lord your

God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). Only after this positive statement is the prohibition given, and even then, the command is not presented as an abstract ban such as "it is forbidden."

The command in Genesis 2:17, "you shall not," 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 eat freely 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>2</sup>

From the very beginning, thus, 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. Of Noah it is recorded twice (6:22, 7:5). And the patriarchs are commended for obeying God's commands (18:19; 21:4; 22:18; 26:5).

### **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. In discussing patriarchal

history, Terence Fretheim notes: "These ancestral texts also demonstrate that law cannot be collapsed into the law given at Sinai. At the same time, they show that Sinai law basically conforms to already existing law."<sup>3</sup>

Intriguing hints embedded within the Genesis narratives have often been overlooked when considering ancient morality. The 10 precepts of the Decalogue are already operant in human lives.

*Creation/Sabbath (Genesis 2:1-3).* The Sabbath appears in numerous, varied Old Testament texts. The Pentateuch contains what is considered the earliest references to it. This special day plays a prominent role in the opening chapters of Genesis at the climax of the Creation account (1:1-2:4). Genesis 2:1-3 reveals God completing His creative activity in six days, after which He "rested" on "the seventh day." The seventh day is mentioned three times, marking its importance over the previous six days.

"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 inclusively that every human being is to engage in . . . ‘imitation of God,’ by resting on the ‘seventh day.’ ‘Man’ . . . made in the . . . ‘image of God,’ (Gen. 1:26-28) is invited to follow the Exemplar.<sup>24</sup> And when the Sabbath is accented in the wilderness wanderings before Sinai, it is clear that it is not being introduced as something new (Ex. 16:28).

The creation week cycle is 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* (Genesis 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 that it involves time. Verse 3, often translated “in the course of time” (NASB) or “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 humanity. “Eden is off-limits to humanity, but God is not restricted to Eden’s compound.”<sup>25</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.

*Cain/Murder and Lying* (Genesis 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 (vss. 9-11). Within Genesis 4:1-17, *Abel* and *brother* occur seven times. These repetitions jar the reader’s attention to the heinous nature of the crime: the murder of one’s own family.

As a result of this grievous murder, Cain (like the serpent in Genesis 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>26</sup> Gordon Wenham 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 (Gen. 3:6-8//4:8) that contrasts strikingly with long dialogues before

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and afterward.

2. The following scene in each case where God investigates and condemns the sin is also remarkably alike:

“Where is Abel your brother?//”  
“Where are you?” (Gen. 4:9; 3:9)

“What have you done?” (Gen. 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” (Gen. 4:11; 3:14, 17).

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

4. In Genesis 3:24, the Lord drove Adam and Eve out of the garden. Cain’s complaint is similar: “You have driven me this day from the face of the ground” (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. Fratricide graphically illustrates the defile-

ment of sin. In chapters 3 and 4, Eve has to be persuaded by the serpent to disregard the Creator’s advice (3:1-5); 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 immediate alienation between Adam and Eve with God. When God pronounces sentence on Adam, Eve, and the serpent, they accept it without protest (vss. 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. The murder of Abel, however, 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.

The 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. “Human beings should know

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what an octopus fastened its tentacles upon the race when sin took hold. With terrible realism the narrative continues.”<sup>7</sup>

The Decalogue prohibition against murder has not yet been given. In Genesis 4, however, 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.

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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 in Genesis 4:5 is an advance presentation of the principle Jesus much later elucidates in His Sermon on the Mount, equating anger in the heart to murder.

*Lamech/Bigamy and Murder (Genesis 4:19-24).* In taking two wives (vs. 19), Lamech deliberately diverts from the divine ideal for marriage in Genesis 2:24, the union 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>8</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 (Genesis 4:26).* All through Scripture, the name of God is declared holy: “The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; Let the earth be moved! The Lord is great in Zion, and He is high above all the peoples. Let them praise *Your great and awesome name—He is holy*” (Ps. 99:1-3, italics supplied).

Long before Mount Sinai’s command to honor God’s name, people exalted it: “Men began to call on 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.

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

lence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (vss. 5, 11, 12).

The phrase “the Lord saw” (Gen. 6:5) links with the creation story (“God saw,” Gen. 1:31) in a startling manner. Human evil is now presented with biting force through the inclusive words “every . . . only . . . continually”(6:5). Moreover, all of life is linked together, for all living creatures share the same deliverance or divine death sentence.

After the Flood, God gives another injunction against murder: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man” (Gen. 9:6). 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 created in the very image of God, strikingly linking to the transcendent value of life announced during Creation week (Gen. 1:26, 27). The divine image is still acknowledged by God in post-Flood sinful humans, explicitly linking post-Flood humanity to Adam.

God exacts punishment for spilling the lifeblood of another human being. 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 were in existence. Retributive justice does not commence in the Mosaic Covenant. It is found in the divine covenant with Noah, already operating since the first murder in Genesis 4.

*Noah and His Sons/Filial Irreverence and Sexual Perversion (Genesis 9:20-27).* This incident involves sexual irregularity connected with drunkenness. The Hebrew word for “saw” in this text means “looked at (searchingly)” (Song of Songs 1:6; 6:11). It 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 on his nakedness! You are filled with shame instead of glory” (Hab. 2:15, 16). 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 Japheth, is detailed. The narrative slows when the other two brothers refrain from further impropriety. Twice it says that they went “backwards,” and that they covered and did not see “their father’s naked-

ness.” The fifth commandment of honoring a parent is apparently operant long before the pronouncement of it from Mount Sinai. Also implied is the standard of sexual purity of the seventh commandment.

*Tower of Babel/Making a “Name” (Genesis 11:1-9).* This narrative is linked to the description in Genesis 4:26 of calling “on the name of the Lord”: “Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that . . . they said to one another, ‘let us make a name for ourselves’” (11:1-4, italics supplied). 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. They deliberately disregarded the “name of God” later upheld in the third commandment of the Decalogue.

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 (Genesis 19:1-38).* The moral compass of Lot and his daughters is very confused. Lurid sexual pervers-

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sion tainted their lives. The horrible depth of vice in Sodom is indicated by “young men and old” showing up at Lot’s house, revealing inter-generational corruption. The enormity of their sin is also indicated by the fact that their sacred duty of hospitality was so completely distorted that Lot’s guests were demanded for abuse, even though Lot urges them not to do “this wicked thing” (19:7, NIV).

The events of this narrative display shocking depravity. Lot does not protect his daughters but offers them to inflamed men. His “hospitality” reflects moral confusion. Later, these daughters will sexually abuse their father. The last picture of Lot, nephew of noble Abraham, is embedded in incest. “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, Numbers 25) and the cruelest religious perversion (that of Molech, Lev.

18:21). So much stemmed from a self-regarding choice (13:10f.) and persistence in it.”

Kenneth Mathews describes this Genesis 19 narrative as involving “a web of the most vile circumstances.”<sup>10</sup> These verses indicate another example of not honoring parents, along with issues of not committing adultery.

*Abraham/Divine Worship (Genesis 22:5; 24:26, 48, 52).* Though surrounded by pagan polytheistic nations, Abraham’s faithfully worship of the one true God is pictured in the Genesis narratives. His godly influence obviously spread throughout his household, for even his servants testify to their faith in the true God. On his journey to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham’s trusted servant describes how God answered his prayer for guidance: “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” (24:48). In fact,

*Like his father, Isaac bore false witness, involving the ninth commandment of the future 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 is wrong.*

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Genesis 24 records this servant worshipping God three times!

Abimelech, Pharaoh, Abraham, and Isaac/Adultery and Lying (Genesis 12; 20; 26). Fundamental Decalogue principles are also seen as operant beyond the Covenant line. God's standard of righteousness is the same within the nations through which the patriarchs travel. The three "adultery narratives" of Genesis 12; 20; 26 involve three different places and rulers. In Genesis 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.

Later, Isaac finds himself in a situation very similar to the one his father had experienced twice. Like his father, Isaac bore false witness, involving the ninth commandment of

the future 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 is wrong. He insists, "Quite obviously, she is your wife" (Gen. 26:9).

Abimelech then administers a well-deserved rebuke to Isaac: "You would have brought guilt on us" (vs. 10). In attempting to spare his own life through deception, Isaac was risking the lives of everyone else. Remarkably, Abimelech clearly understands this principle. 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 (Egyptians, Canaanites, Aramaeans) are sensitive to precepts of the Sinai Decalogue. "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>11</sup>

*Rebekah's Deception and Jacob's Lies (Genesis 27)/ Laban's Lies (Genesis 29:21-26):* Deceptive conversations are included in each narrative, 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: "Look, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth-skinned man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be a deceiver to him" (27:11, 12).

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>12</sup>

When Esau learns 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 now look, he has taken away my blessing!" (Gen. 27:36). His anger is so great that he plans a revenge murder of his brother: "Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, 'The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob'" (vs. 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 you? Why then have you *deceived* me?" (vs. 25, italics added).

*Rachel's Stealing (Genesis 31):* "Rachel *stole* her father's household gods" when Jacob determined to leave Laban's employment (31:19, NIV, italics supplied). Laban eventually caught up with the fleeing family and inquires of Jacob: "Why did you *steal* my gods?" (vs. 30, italics supplied). The narrator mentions that "Jacob did not know that Rachel had *stolen* the gods" (vs. 32, NIV, italics supplied). Jacob defends

his innocence, which implies that he knew stealing was wrong. Rachel's act of stealing is portrayed in the narrative as wrongful. The eighth commandment of the Decalogue, however, is yet to be proclaimed from Mount Sinai.

*Shechem, Hamor, Simeon, and Levi/Coveting, Rape, Murder, Lying (Genesis 34).* Shechem, a determined young man, does not politely address his father when expressing his emphatic desire for Dinah. He 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 (vss. 2, 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. Their word for the "infamous deed" is an expression for the most serious kind of sexual depravity. Their insistence that "such a thing ought not to be done" (vs. 7, NASB) suggests they believed that inviolable norms had been breached.

Neither Hamor nor Shechem admits 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 ("Dinah's full brothers," vs. 25, NLT), recoil from the sexual disgrace of their sister. 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 he treat our sister like a harlot?" (34:31).

The very last word on this narrative, however, comes later from Jacob on his deathbed: "[speaking of Simeon and Levi] 'Cursed be their anger'" (Gen. 49:7). Jacob gives voice to the much later explicit link between anger and murder in the Sermon on the Mount. Genesis 34 paints a portrait of grim violence, including rape, deceit, and massacre resulting from covetousness.

*Jacob/Idols (Genesis 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.

***Jacob's sons first suggest that they might murder their brother Joseph (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, which constrains them to confess their long-lasting feelings of guilt and their lying several times.***

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*Joseph and His Brothers/Threat of Murder and Lying (Genesis 39-50).* Jacob's sons first suggest that they might murder their brother Joseph (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, which constrains them to confess their long-lasting feelings of guilt and their lying several times:

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 to pieces'; and I have not seen him since'" (44:27, 28).

Later, after burying their father Jacob: "When Joseph's brothers saw

that their father was dead, they said, 'Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him.' So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, 'Before your father died he commanded, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: 'I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.'" Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father'" (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 (Genesis 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



*Joseph emphasizes that Potiphar's wife is withheld from him for she is a married woman. 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 was undeterred by any of Joseph's considerations.*

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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 him. The baseness of betraying such trust would be wrong.

Further, 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 was undeterred by any of Joseph's considerations. Nor was her seduction a one-time enticement. "Day by day" (Gen. 39:10) she approached him. Apparently she was so persistent that Joseph took the precaution of staying away from her.

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" (Gen. 39:12). To divert suspicion from her to Joseph, Potiphar's wife raised an outcry, 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 (Gen. 39:12), and then Potiphar's wife shouting for help (vs. 14). When Potiphar's wife describes this incident, she first mentions her screaming. Then she describes Joseph's leaving his cloak behind in his rapid exit (vs. 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' (vs. 14). In speaking to her husband, she identifies Joseph as *the*

*Hebrew slave* (vs. 17). . . . The change is certainly deliberate. To be sexually attacked by ['a fellow'] is bad 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>13</sup> She also cleverly attaches "secondary blame to her own husband. After all, it is Potiphar who brought Joseph into the household."<sup>14</sup>

#### The Law Before Mount Sinai

All 10 precepts of the Sinai Decalogue are attested to throughout the Genesis narratives:

1. "You shall have no other gods before Me" (monotheism): Creation Week; Genesis 2:1-3; 4:3, 26; 12:1-3; 22:5; 24:48.

2. "You shall not make . . . a carved image, or . . . bow down to them nor serve them" (Ex. 20:4, 5): Jacob's urging of family to put away idols (Gen. 35:2).

3. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7): 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" (Ex. 20:8, 10): 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 your mother" (Ex. 20:12): Noah/his sons; Lot/his daughters (Gen. 9:20-27; 19:1-38).

6. "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13): 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" (Ex. 20:14): 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" (Ex. 20:15): Rachel steals idols (Gen. 31:13-42).

9. "You shall not bear false witness" (Ex. 20:16): Abraham/Sarah/Pharaoh; Abraham/Sarah/Abimelech; Isaac/Rebekah/Abimelech; Jacob/Esau/Isaac; 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" (Ex. 20:17): Dinah/Shechem; Joseph/Potiphar's wife (Gen. 34:1-4; 39).

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 bless you; for to you and your descen-

dants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father . . . because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Gen. 26:3, 5, italics supplied).

“These terms are well-known from the pages of Deuteronomy (e.g., 11:1; 26:17), where they are the stock vocabulary for describing the keeping of the Torah revealed at Sinai.”<sup>15</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>16</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. By these selective terms, the author of the Pentateuch indicates that divine “laws, commandments, and statutes” undergird morality in the patriarchal period. 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 gaze at a virgin? And what is the portion of God from above Or the heritage of the Almighty from on high? . . . Does He not see my ways And number all my steps? If I have walked with falsehood, and my foot has hastened after deceit, let Him weigh me with accurate scales, and let God know my integrity. . . . If my heart has been enticed by a woman, or I have lurked at my neighbor’s doorway, . . . if I have put my confidence in gold, and called fine gold my trust, . . . and my heart became secretly enticed, that too would have been an iniquity calling for judgment, for I would have denied God above. . . . Have I covered my transgressions like Adam, by hiding my iniquity in my bosom, because I feared the great multitude, . . . If my land cries out against me, and its furrows weep together; if I have eaten its fruit without money, or have caused its owners to lose their lives” (Job 31:1, 2, 4-6, 9, 24, 27, 28, 33, 34, 38, 39, NASB).

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), 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. There are implicit acknowledgments of all 10. The dramatic, overwhelming presentation of the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, rather than being an initial presentation of them, instead underscores the majestic 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). □

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *New King James Version*.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commen-*

*tary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2005), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard F. Hasel, “Sabbath,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, editor-in-chief (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, p. 851.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Genesis 1–11:26* in E. Ray Clendenen, gen. ed., *The New American Commentary New International Version* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2001), p. 275.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon J. Wenham in David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, gen. ed., *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1–15*, (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Genesis 1–11:26*, op cit., p. 289.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, in D. J. Wiseman, gen. ed., *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1967), p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Genesis 1–11:26*, op cit., p. 237.

<sup>11</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*, op cit., p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, in Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., gen. ed., *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17 in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 219, 220.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 469.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>15</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*, op cit., p. 136.