

10-1-1938

What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant?

Th. Laetsch

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Laetsch, Th. (1938) "What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant?," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 9 , Article 70.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol9/iss1/70>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

746 What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant?

alone,—it is that which has made the modern Christian world. And it is an absolutely true insight which sees in LUTHER THE RELIGIOUS REFORMER the promise of our modern civilization in all its redeeming and saving potencies,—in him rather than in ERASMUS THE SCHOLAR.”

WM. DALLMANN

WORKS CONSULTED: Mangan, John Joseph, *Erasmus*, 2 vols. Audin, *Life of Luther*, 2 vols. Lilly, W.S., *Renaissance Types*. Baudrillart, Alf., *The Catholic Church, the Renaissance, and Protestantism*. Clayton, J., *Luther*. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly; Colloquies; Complaint of Peace*. Wilkinson, Wm. Cl., *A Free Lance*. Caird, *University Addresses*. Hyma, Albert, *Erasmus and the Humanists*. Brewer, J. S., *English Studies*. Shaw, *Oxford Reformers*. Abbott, L. F., *Twelve Great Modernists*. Routh, *More and His Friends*. Drummond, R. B., *Erasmus*, 2 vols. Nichols, F. M., *Epistles of Erasmus*. Murray, R. H., *Erasmus and Luther*. Allen, P. S., *Erasmus; Age of Erasmus*. Emerton, *Erasmus and Luther*.

What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant?

A Study of the Methods of Modern Criticism

In the year 1773 Goethe published a small pamphlet entitled *Was stund auf den Tafeln des Bundes?* After referring briefly to the establishment of the covenant narrated Ex. 24:1 ff., he continues: “Then the Lord said unto Moses, Come up unto Me into the mount and be there; and I will give thee tables of stone and a law and commandments which I have written. Moses ascends to the Lord and is given the specifications for the Tabernacle. Finally we are told, And when the Lord had made an end of communing with him, He gave him the tables. What was written on them no one finds out. The disorder with the calf occurs, and Moses breaks the tables before we can even surmise their contents.” From Ex. 34:12–26 Goethe then draws the conclusion that the Ten Commandments, the Mosaic Decalog, was transmitted in a twofold tradition, the contents of the Decalog varying essentially in the two forms.

Goethe's opinion unfortunately did not die with him. It is continually being revived by modern radical critics and used by them as one of their stock arguments against the Mosaic authorship and historical reliability of the Pentateuch. In 1931 J. Powis Smith published his *Origin and History of Hebrew Law*, where we read on page 35 f.: “The laws in Exodus, chapter 34, originally seem to have formed a decalog of their own. It is commonly known as the ‘Older Decalog.’ This title implies that it is older than the Decalog of Exodus, chapter 20, and Deuteronomy, chapter 5. But . . . this opinion is open to serious question. . . . This ‘Older Decalog’ is variously constructed by different scholars; but all agree upon the first two and the last four commandments as having

What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant? 747

belonged to it. It was first discovered in A. D. 1773 by Goethe." He finds the Ten Commandments in vv. 14, 17, 18, 19, 20b, 21, 25a, 25b, 26a, 26b. Julius Bewer, in *The Literature of the Old Testament in Its Historical Development*, 1928, writes, p. 39 ff.: "The parallel to the concluding laws (23:14-19), which is found in Ex. 34:10-26, has received much attention since Goethe thought that he had discovered here another decalog, which some have regarded not only as older than the moral decalog of Ex. 20, but even as going back to Moses himself. . . . The sentences immediately following (vv. 27, 28) have been the cause of the never-ending search for the original decalog in the foregoing, although in the nature of the case there can be no agreement on the ten laws which are believed to constitute it. . . . The final words 'the Ten Commandments' are a later addition by one who believed that it was the decalog that was originally written on the two tables of stone and not, as the author of Ex. 34 held, the Book of the Covenant." Eissfeldt is of the opinion that it was customary in Israel to assemble certain rules into decalogs. One of these decalogs is found in Ex. 34: 12 ff., inscribed perhaps on stone tablets and read at certain festivals by a priest representing the god (*den Gott*). He accepts Mowinckel's suggestion that these particular cultic festivals are to be conceived as celebrating originally the renewal of God's covenant with Israel and asserts that later generations based their presentation of the *establishment* of the covenant on the exalted stage of Sinai in the ritual of this festival. (*Einleitung*, 1934, p. 78 f.) Another well-known German radical, Paul Rohrbach, informs us, after referring to Goethe's pamphlet, that the irrefutable inner and outer differences between Ex. 20:1-17 and 34:14-26 prove that the two decalogs are memorials of two stages of religious development, separated both as to time and content. The cultic decalog (Ex. 34) is the older, still standing close to a primitive form of belief in a god; the ethical decalog is younger and explainable only in the age of prophecy. (Rohrbach, *Der Gottesgedanke in der Welt*, 1937, p. 30 f.)

Is it really so impossible a task to ascertain what was written on the first tables, and are we obliged to assume a twofold tradition of the Decalog or two actually different decalogs, one earlier, the other later, one cultic, the other ethic? With regard to the second question, critics are not agreed among themselves. We note that J. Powis Smith says that the Sinaitic Decalog was formerly called the older one but that in the opinion of modern critics it is the younger. Sellin, in his *Einleitung*, p. 28 f., assigns Ex. 20 to the Elohist, Ex. 34 to the Jahvist, yet ridicules the theory that Ex. 34 is the older and calls attention to the impossibility of finding a decalog at all in Ex. 34 without doing violence to the text. In

748 What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant?

fact, critics disagree in numbering these commandments, and we may just as well count eleven or twelve. Try it yourself. There is no plausible reason for assuming a second decalog in Ex. 34.

But can we know what was written on these tables? Let us see what the Bible, after all the safest guide, tells us.

When the Lord was about to establish His covenant with Israel and give to His chosen people His holy Law, He descended upon the mount of Sinai, at the foot of which the people had assembled. After the final preparations had been made, the Lord, in a loud voice and in the hearing of all the people, spake the words of the Ten Commandments. Cp. Ex. 20:19-22; Deut. 4:11-13, 33; 5:4, 5, 22-26. The Biblical record leaves no doubt as to the Decalog's having been proclaimed in the hearing of all Israel. There is not the slightest foundation for the assertion of Eissfeldt, *Einleitung*, p. 242, that according to the original records the people did not hear the Ten Commandments out of the mouth of God, that the Decalog was given only to Moses and by him transmitted to Israel. The only reason Eissfeldt advances is that Ex. 20:18-20 originally preceded vv. 1-17 but was placed in its present position after the Decalog in order that chap. 20:22 to 23:33 might find a place in the Sinaitic narrative. His purpose in making this utterly unfounded suggestion is evident. In his opinion 20:22 to 23:33, particularly its opening paragraph, 20:24-26, was primarily a protest by defenders of a simple cult against overrefinement, luxuriousness of altars, and centralization of worship, this protest dating from any time between the building of Solomon's Temple and Josiah's reform, a period of ever-increasing refinement of the Temple-worship. (Eissfeldt, *Einleitung*, p. 240-251.)

When Moses, after the divine promulgation of the Decalog, again ascended the mount, God gave him other commandments which he was to teach his people, laws recorded chap. 20:22 to 23:33, the first section of which prohibited idolatry and restricted sacrifice to such places where God Himself would record His name, by a glorious self-manifestation consecrate the place. The section beginning with chap. 21 contains what the Lord Himself calls "judgments." Note that these were not spoken to Israel directly but that Moses was to say them to Israel, 20:22, set them before the people, 21:1. Coming down from the mount, Moses told the people all the words of the Lord and "all the judgments." This evidently refers to those words which the people had not heard directly out of the mouth of God, the conjunction "and" before "all the judgments" being the explanatory "and," having the sense of *even, namely*; cp. Ex. 24:12; 1 Sam. 17:40 ("even in a scrip"), etc. The people with one accord expressed their willingness to do according to the will of the Lord. Perhaps on the

What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant? 749

same day Moses wrote "all the words of the Lord," v. 4, "in the Book of the Covenant," v. 7, not only those he had heard on the mount but the Decalog also, since that was the most important part of that covenant which the Lord had just made with Israel, Ex. 19:5-9; 20:1-17, and the Book of the Covenant would not have been complete without this basic law of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. After the solemn ratification of the covenant by sacrifice and the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant, 24:4-8, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu and seventy elders "went up and saw the God of Israel and did eat and drink," vv. 9-11.

It is at this point that the Lord tells Moses: "Come up unto Me into the mount and be there; and I will give thee tables of stone and a law and commandments which I have written that thou mayest teach them," Ex. 24:12, literally, the tables of stone and the Law and the commandment (singular) which I have written. The "and" preceding "a law" again is the *vav explicativum*; the Lord did not give to Moses blank tables and in addition a law but tables on which something was written, namely, the Law, even the commandment. Law, *thorah*, means primarily instruction and describes what was written on the tables as a teaching. It is derived from the same stem as the verb at the end of the sentence, "Thou shalt teach them." "Commandment" designates and describes this Law written on the tables as the precept, order, charge, command, which obligates to obedience. Now, to what does this expression, the Law and the commandment, refer? Does it include the whole legislation from 20:2 to 23:33 or the section 20:22 to 23:33 or only to the Decalog? We note that the term "commandment," *mizvah*, occurs only in the Ten Commandments, Ex. 20:6, where it is used in the plural, but that it does not at all occur in Ex. 20:22 to 23:33. This fact would incline us to assume that God, speaking of His commandment, His *mizvah*, has in mind that body of laws called His commandments, *mizvoth*, in Ex. 20:7, i. e., the Decalog. This assumption is proved to be correct by other clear and definite passages of Scripture. God Himself told Moses, Ex. 34:1: "Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first; and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest." And Moses, who certainly knew what was written on these tables, forty years later tells the Israelites, Deut. 9:9-11: "When I was gone up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I abode in the mount forty days and forty nights, I neither did eat bread nor drink water; and the Lord delivered unto me two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them was written according to all the words which the Lord spake with you in the

750 What was Written on the Two Tables of the Covenant?

mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly. And it came to pass at the end of forty days and forty nights that the Lord gave me the two tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant." In language too clear to be misunderstood, Moses himself, who was in a position to know the facts, informs us that on the two tables he received on Mount Sinai was written according to, exactly like, the words which Israel had heard, hence a copy of the Decalog. And in vv. 15-17 he tells them that these are the very tables which he broke. Again in Deut. 10:2 the Lord Himself tells Moses: "And I will write on the tables the words that were in the first tables which thou brakest, and thou shalt put them in the ark." Cp. Ex. 24:1. And as if to avoid all misunderstanding as to the identity of the contents of the two sets of tables, Moses adds, vv. 3, 4: "And I made an ark of shittim wood and hewed two tables of stone like unto the first and went up into the mount, having the two tables in mine hand. And He wrote on the tables, according to the first writing, the Ten Commandments which the Lord spake unto you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and the Lord gave them unto me." Hence the word Ex. 34:28: "And He wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments," do not speak of Moses' writing but of the Lord's, who was mentioned in the preceding words and whose writing had been foretold in Ex. 24:1. Hengstenberg refers to Gen. 24:32 and 29:3, where "he" and "they" do not refer to "man" and "flocks," but to persons mentioned before. Bewer's statement that the final words "the Ten Commandments" are a later addition has not the slightest foundation; it is one of the easy and cheap ways of modern critics to get rid of material not suited to their theories. Moses was told to write the words which the Lord had just spoken to him but was not told to write them on tables of stone. The Lord had told Moses: "I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest," Ex. 34:1, and v. 28 Moses narrates the fulfilment of this promise.

The word "covenant" therefore is used in Ex. 34:28 in a different sense from that in v. 27. In v. 28 it is explained by Moses himself as referring to the Decalog. In v. 27 it refers to the covenant made "after the tenor of these words," to the covenant mentioned in v. 10 and contained in vv. 10-26. In v. 10 God promises to make a covenant, i. e., to renew the covenant made with Israel, that covenant which had originally been written in the Book of the Covenant, containing both the Decalog and the "judgments," Ex. 20-23, and accepted by the people, 24:3-7. This covenant had been broken by Israel. And since they had broken it by a false worship of God, He warns them once more against

all manner of false worship, not only against gross idolatry, vv. 11-17, but against every neglect of their divinely prescribed worship, or cult, 18-26. "For after the tenor of these words," אֲבָרָא, according to the mouth, the saying, the exact wording of the words which I have just spoken, "did I make My covenant with you." His covenant made on Mount Sinai contained not only moral commandments, it comprised also many laws pertaining to the form of worship, to the ritual, the cult. This lesson they had forgotten; they had worshiped God in a manner forbidden by Him. This was the lesson that had to be stressed by Him in renewing His covenant. That explains why Ex. 34:10-27 repeats not the Decalog, but only laws pertaining to worship, all of which are to be found in the original covenant legislation of Ex. 20-23.

There can be no doubt that according to the divine records found in the Pentateuch the two sets of tables of stone contained the written Decalog. Whether the Decalog was written in the form found in Ex. 20:2-17, which I regard as most probable, or in the form of Deut. 5:6-21, or combining the two forms, is of little consequence; in each case it was the Decalog, the Ten Commandments, the words which Israel had heard out of the cloud and the fire.

TH. LAETSCH

Sermon Study on Heb. 13:1-9

Eisenach Epistle-lesson for the Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is as little known as its addressees. This uncertainty as to the identity of the writer and the readers of this letter does not render the purpose of the letter uncertain and dubious. The recipients of the letter were quite evidently Jewish Christians, long-time members of the Church, 5:12, who had endured "a great fight of afflictions," 10:32-34. They had experienced to the full the persecutions foretold by the Savior, Mark 10:21, 22, and they may still have been in the thick of the fight when this letter was written. Evidently they were finding it increasingly harder to endure to the end, since there seemed to be no end of their persecution in sight. Or if the bloody persecution had ceased or abated to some extent, they were, as adherents of a *religio illicita*, still misunderstood, ostracized, slandered, by their heathen neighbors and hated with bitter malevolence by their own fellow-Jews. Because of their faith in the crucified Jesus they were still made to feel that they were regarded as the offscouring and the refuse in the midst of the people, Lam. 3:45. And "they found the long sustained conflict with sin, 12:4, and the day-by-day contempt and derision they experienced as Christians, 13:13, more wearing to the spirit than sharp persecu-