

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'Are there really ten commandments?'

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Are there really ten commandments?

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The Ten Commandments is a strange icon in the modern world, and a much imitated one.

Prior to the 2019 General Election, the Conservative leader Boris Johnson unveiled his own Ten Commandments. Ten promises that he would deliver on within a hundred days if elected.

Earlier that year, the Church of England issued Ten Digital Commandments. They provided guidance on how to remain civil online.

Commandments, it seems, must come in tens. Nine is too few and eleven is too many.

If you know nothing about the Ten Commandments, you will know this: they are commandments, and there are ten of them.

What I want to do in the next ten minutes is examine these two things, that everyone thinks they know, and show that things are perhaps not quite so easy.

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Testament at The Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, and Fellow and Director of Studies for Theology, Religion and the Philosophy of Religion at St John's College.

The Ten Commandments are found in the scriptures that are common to Judaism and Christianity - those scriptures that are known as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.

They were composed at some point in the first millennium BCE and the University Library in Cambridge has one of the oldest preserved examples of the Ten Commandments.

It's a text called the Nash Papyrus, and it is one of the items featured on the 50 Religious Treasures of Cambridge website, which you can reach from the Faculty of Divinity's web page and I hope that you'll have a look at it after you finish this lecture.

Although we've come to speak of them as the Ten Commandments, they're never called commandments in the Hebrew Bible. Instead, they are known as the 'ten

words', and in the Jewish tradition, the first of these words is not a commandment at all, it is the opening introduction:

'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt'.

The second word is then the prohibition of worshipping other gods and idols.

What is a Commandment? At a basic level, we might answer by saying it is a form of law. These are the laws that are to guide Israel for how it is to live in the Promised Land.

Yet, these commandments make for a very strange sort of law. If you've got a Bible, you'll find the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. Flick over a couple of pages and you'll find yourself immersed in something that is much more recognisable as law.

Let me pick one example: "If men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or fist so that the injured party, though not dead, is confined to bed, but recovers and walks around outside with the help of a staff, then the assailant shall be free of liability, except to pay for the loss of time, and to arrange for full recovery".

This looks like a classic example of communal law that could have developed from an actual case. A precise description of a case is described, with some of the conditions, and the legal penalties that are to follow in such a case.

If the injured man does not recover, however, a different set of legal penalties come into play.

The Ten Commandments are nothing like that. They are bald, absolute statements, most of which begin with 'You shall not'.

They are of no use to a judge in a court room because they do not provide any guidance on sentencing or legal penalties.

The commandments in the Ten Commandments are about values, not penalties.

One interesting question we could ask is where might such commandments have originated?

Clearly not in the courtroom. The answer may be, rather, in the world of international diplomacy.

The form 'you shall not...' is similar to what we find in ancient treaties imposed by an overlord on a vassal king.

They are about political loyalty, but they are also absolute statements because behind them lies the threat of massive military force.

The Ten Commandments can be seen as something similar. God is Israel's overlord to whom is owed absolute loyalty.

But how many commandments are there? We've already had a hint of the problem with the Jewish numbering, which begins with 'I am the Lord Your God' as the first of the ten words. If that's number one, isn't the maths going to go wrong somewhere down the line?

In fact, there are different numberings of the commandments in the different Christian traditions too: Lutheran, Orthodox and Catholic.

How can this be?

The problem originates in the Biblical text itself, and in particular the first two commandments: 'You shall have no other gods' and 'You shall not make an idol'.

Are these one commandment or two?

In Exodus, when the Ten Commandments are first described, they are two distinct commandments. The first prohibits the worship of other gods, and the second, the making of idols.

But in Deuteronomy, when the Ten Commandments are repeated, they are combined into one complex commandment.

Now this means the numbering in Deuteronomy is going to be one behind the numbering in Exodus. Ultimately, that is going to be a problem. After all, if we

know nothing else about the Ten Commandments, we know this one thing: there are ten of them. Not eleven, not nine, but ten.

The problem doesn't get resolved until the very end of the Ten Commandments. In Exodus, the final commandment concerns coveting: 'do not covet your neighbour's house', and that is defined further as including his wife, his servants, his animals or anything else.

But in Deuteronomy, this commandment has been transformed into two commandments using slightly different Hebrew verbs. 'Do not covet your neighbour's wife' is its own distinct commandment and a further commandment, 'do not desire your neighbour's house, field, servants, animals or anything else'.

In this way, Deuteronomy's list of commandments manages to catch up with the list in Exodus.

'The Ten Commandments': in the last ten minutes, I've tried to show that 'Ten' and 'Commandments' are more complex than we might have realised.

But we'll have to conclude that is also true of that understated word that precedes them: 'The'. These differences in numbering highlight the fact that the Ten Commandments occur in two different versions in the Bible.

As a result, it's not easy to say that there is such a thing as 'The Ten Commandments'.

Now that you've come to the end of this lecture, why not take a look at those two versions of the Ten Commandments? You'll find one in Exodus 20 and the other in Deuteronomy 5.

Read them closely and compare them. Can you see any other differences between them?