

The Number Ten and the Iniquity of the Fathers: A New Interpretation of the Decalogue

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The Decalogue is said to be the best known and most influential passage in the whole Old Testament. Understandably, scholars have spent much energy elucidating this text, and in fact, during the past generation or so, some progress has been made in its understanding. From what has been written, I accept the assumption that the Deuteronomic version (Deut 5), rather than the one included in the book of Exodus (Ex 20), should be considered the older and more original text.¹ I also accept the notion that the Decalogue represents an edited text, a passage in which several textual layers can be identified. In what follows I propose a new approach to the Decalogue by taking a fresh look at the number of the commandments and at the expression »the iniquity of the fathers«.

I. The Number of the Commandments

Why are there, according to the simplest way of counting, twelve instead of ten commandments? The Decalogue itself does not tell us to count ten items; however, elsewhere the Bible refers to this text as the »ten words« (Deut 4,13), though without telling us how these are to be counted. Apparently, then, there are more than ten commandments! The most likely explanation is that the Decalogue is not presented in its original form; it may well be that an originally shorter text was expanded by the insertion of additional commandments. But which commandments were added?

Two observations will bring us one step farther.

The first observation relates to Deuteronomy 5,16b. Generally, this passage is translated as in the English Standard Version:²

(16a) Honour your father and your mother, (16b) as Yahweh your God commanded you, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you.

¹ This has been argued convincingly by E.-L. Hossfeld, *Der Dekalog*, OBO 45, 1982.

² Holy Bible. English Standard Version, 2001.

I have often wondered why life and prosperity in the land should be dependent upon a single commandment – that of honouring one’s parents. No doubt some of my students will remember an explanation that I have suggested previously: literally understood, the divine promise is linked to the parental commandment, but in fact it applies to each of the other commandments as well. This interpretation receives support from another Deuteronomic passage in which Moses says: »Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you this day, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which Yahweh your God gives you for ever« (Deut 4,40). An ancient Hebrew inscription (mentioned below) sheds new light on the matter by revealing the possibility of starting a Hebrew sentence with the words »Thus (כִּאֲשֶׁר) he commands you«, and, following this example, I prefer to dissociate the promise given in v. 16b from specific and exclusive association with the parental commandment. Instead, I would suggest the following rendering:

(16a) Honour your father and your mother.

(16b) *Thus* [= as explained above] *Yahweh your God commands you*, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land that Yahweh your God has given you.

On this understanding, the promise refers to *all* the previously given commandments (exclusive worship of Yahweh, no images, etc.), including, of course, the injunction to honour one’s parents. The real problem associated with this passage, however, is not its translation, but its position within the literary structure of the Decalogue. Verse 16b, though placed in the middle of the Decalogue, looks very much like a concluding note. This suffix sounds like the conclusion of an older, shorter series of commandments; everything that follows would be a later addition.

Our second observation relates to the Sabbath (v. 12–15). Scholars assume that the Sabbath originated not in a Deuteronomic milieu, but in a »sacerdotal« one; this can be concluded from the fact that outside the Decalogue, Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic literature never refer to the Sabbath, whereas so-called priestly texts have several versions of the commandment to keep the Sabbath.³ In its wording, this commandment combines the language typical of the »sacerdotal« milieu (»Sabbath«, »holy«) with rhetoric that is characteristic of Deuteronomy

³ Ex 31,12–17; 35,1–3; Lev 19,3; 23,3; Num 15,32–36; see B. Lang, »Sabbatgebot«, in: *Neues Bibel-Lexikon*, ed. M. Görg and B. Lang, 2001, vol. 3, 391–394.

(»Yahweh your God«, »with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm«), as if authors from two different schools of thought had cooperated in its compilation. The wording of the commandment seems to have been partly influenced by the »priestly« school's concern with promoting the Sabbath as an institution in exilic or postexilic Israel (6th or 5th century B.C.E.). Thus, it seems that the Sabbath commandment is a special case among the others of the Decalogue. Its unique nature is also evident in its unusual length and detail – with its sixty-four words (in Hebrew), it is the longest commandment of the twelve!

On the basis of the above observations several stages of the Decalogue's textual development can be reconstructed. All the relevant problems can be solved by assuming that the Sabbath commandment (v. 12–15) and the list of civil commandments (v. 17–21) represent later additions, with the civil commandments being added first, and the Sabbath commandment being added later to the originally shorter text.

The original text that stood at the beginning (stage I) may have read as follows (with five commandments marked by Roman numerals):

(6) I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

I (7) You shall have no gods besides me.

II (8) You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

III (9) You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I Yahweh your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (10) but showing steadfast love to the families of those who love me and keep my commandments.

IV (11) You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain, for Yahweh will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

V (16) Honour your father and your mother.

Thus Yahweh your God commands you that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land which Yahweh your God is giving you.

This series of five commandments – a pentologue – seems to have been compiled from several building blocks – some being prohibitions in which God speaks in the first person, and others that refer to God in the third person. These building blocks must have belonged to different, now lost, textual structures, but which were reused here intact, presumably because of their sacred, or at least traditional, character. Compiled thus of somewhat heterogeneous, first-person and third-person commandments, the composite text was framed by a prologue, where God introduces himself – »I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of

the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage« – and a conclusion: »Thus Yahweh your God commands you, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land which Yahweh your God is giving you.« Reconstructed in this manner, verses 6–16 (minus v. 12–15) comprise a text complete in itself, one that challenges its addressees to commit themselves to the exclusive worship of Yahweh, the God of the exodus and the giving of the land of Israel. As reminders of divine intervention, exodus and the giving of the land frame the pentalogue.

Subsequently, the purely religious nature of the earlier text – that of stage I – was no longer maintained. An editor felt that the series of five religious prohibitions and commandments should be matched by an equal number of civil commandments. Accordingly, the pentalogue was expanded by the addition of v. 17–21. The addition forms a harmonious series of five commandments or rather prohibitions. The added passage transforms the original text into a double pentalogue. All the new prohibitions are short, so that we have a long, religious pentalogue, followed by a shorter non-religious one. At this stage, we can truly speak of a decalogue: a series of ten commandments. Interestingly, v. 16b – »Thus Yahweh your God commands you that your days may be prolonged (etc.)« – is now used to introduce what follows; or rather, the same words may be read both as a conclusion to the first series of five commandments (the religious pentalogue) and as a preface to the second series of five commandments (the civil pentalogue).

At a later stage, another editor noted the lack of a reference to the Sabbath in the ten commandments (stage II), and by inserting the long Sabbath commandment of v. 12–15, gave the Decalogue its final form, the one found in our Bibles and translated below (stage III). There can be little doubt that, in the eyes of the editor who inserted this commandment, it was precisely the Sabbath that mattered most. The Sabbath commandment was apparently new,⁴ so people had to be instructed in the details of its rules – hence a commandment that is longer than any other in the Decalogue. The injunction to keep the Sabbath day now appears as the pivotal commandment, the one that most visibly structures the life of an individual.

The addition of the Sabbath commandment upsets the relatively balanced structure of the ›stage II‹ text – five religious plus five civil commandments – for now, at stage III, we have six religious command-

⁴ I assume that the week of seven days originated »late« within the history of ancient Israel; possibly, it was introduced in the 6th century B.C.E., at the beginning of the Persian period, when the authorities suppressed the Babylonian calendar to use the Persian one instead; see Ph. Guillaume, »Genesis 1 as a Charter of a Revolutionary Calendar«, *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology* 24 (2003), 141–148.

ments plus five civil ones. This imbalance was presumably solved by a different way of counting the non-religious commandments of the ›second table‹. The tenth commandment of the ›stage II‹ text – the one prohibiting the appropriation of someone else’s estate during the owner’s prolonged absence⁵ – was presumably seen as consisting of two prohibitions, so the complete, balanced text comprised six religious and six civil commandments – a dodecalogue. The following translation of the Decalogue places the two textual additions in boxes to illustrate how the passage grew to achieve its final form:

The Decalogue (Dodecalogue) Deuteronomy 5:6–21

The Arabic numbers in brackets – (6), (7), (8) etc. – refer to the traditional biblical verses; the bold numbers – 1, 2, 3 etc. – designate the twelve commandments, the Roman numbers – I, II, III etc. – mark the Ten Commandments.

(6) I am *Yahweh* your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

1/I (7) You shall have no gods besides me.

2/II (8) You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

3/III (9) You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I *Yahweh* your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (10) but showing steadfast love to the families of those who love me and keep my commandments.

4/IV (11) You shall not take the name of *Yahweh* your God in vain, for *Yahweh* will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

second addition:

5 (12) Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Thus *Yahweh* your God commands you: (13) For six days you shall labour and do all your work; (14) but the seventh day is a Sabbath for *Yahweh* your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. (15) You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and *Yahweh* your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore *Yahweh* your God commands you to keep the Sabbath day.

⁵ B. Lang, »Du sollst nicht nach der Frau eines anderen verlangen. Eine neue Deutung des 9. und 10. Gebots«, ZAW 93 (1981), 216–224. The commandment may actually have more applications than those indicated in my paper; see a letter of complaint to the Assyrian king, dating from the early seventh century B.C.E.: »They are giving my house, my field, and my wife to Nenea, an exorcist ... [without justification]« (F. Reynolds, The Babylonian Correspondence of Esarhaddon, SAA 18, 2003, 46–47, letter no. 61).

6/V (16a) Honour your father and your mother.

(16b) Thus *Yahweh* your God commands you that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which *Yahweh* your God has given you.

first addition:

7/VI (17) You shall not murder.

8/VII (18) And shall not commit adultery.

9/VIII (19) And you shall not steal.

10/IX (20) And you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

11/X (21a) And you shall not covet your neighbour's wife.

12 (21b) And you shall not desire your neighbour's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.

Thus far, we have counted the commandments; but there are other things to be counted as well, and the result is worth reporting. How many words does the Decalogue have? Beginning with v. 6 («I am *Yahweh* your God»), and ending with v. 21 («or anything that is your neighbour's»), the Decalogue contains 189 Hebrew words. The word placed at the very centre – no. 95 of 189 words – is לַיהוָה, »for *Yahweh*« or »belonging to *Yahweh*«. It was no doubt intentional that the compiler placed the expression »for *Yahweh*« – a kind of religious slogan dear to him – at the very centre of his text. Some more arithmetic is equally revealing: the counting of the expressions denoting the deity. Here are the relevant statistics:

<i>Yahweh</i>	10 times
God (אלהים)	10 times
God (אל)	1 time (in the expression »jealous God«)
gods	1 time (in the expression אלהים אחרים, »other gods«)

There can be no doubt about the significance of the number of uses of »God« and »*Yahweh*«. Apparently, by using the name *Yahweh* ten times in his text, the final editor sought to compensate for the growth of the series from ten to twelve commandments. What had become the Dodecalogue was consecrated by ten sacred words – the tenfold repetition of the divine name *Yahweh*, supported by the tenfold use of אלהים, »God«. Irrespective of whether one counts ten or twelve commandments, one is justified to call the passage »the ten words« (Deut 4,13; 10,4; Ex 34,28) – a text shaped by the tenfold use of the divine name.

Why should the redactor of the biblical text resort to the tenfold use of the divine name? Why was the number ten so important? And why was it possible to add two commandments to an earlier list of ten items? Consideration of ancient systems of counting shows that both 10 and 12 were taken to be sacred and perfect numbers by some of the Is-

raelites. In their world, two numerical systems vied with each other: the decimal system based on the number 10, and the sexagesimal one with its preference for the numbers 6 and 12. Both systems are still used today – the sexagesimal system for dividing the day into twelve hours and the hour into sixty minutes, and the decimal system for dividing the meter into one hundred centimetres. In antiquity, the Pythagoreans considered the number 10 the »perfect« number (τέλειος ἀριθμός)⁶ and spoke of the 5 as denoting »justice«;⁷ since the Pythagoreans derived their interest pertaining to numbers from Phoenicia,⁸ we may assume that the Israelites were familiar with the numerology of their Phoenician neighbours. Not only in Phoenicia, but also in Syria, Ebla, Assyria and Egypt the ancient scribes used the decimal system. The Sumerians and Babylonians, by contrast, based their calculations on a sexagesimal system.⁹ The ancient Israelites seem to have been familiar with both systems, and both of them have actually left their mark on the Decalogue. The familiar expression the Ten Commandments reflects the decimal preference, while the twelve commandments (as argued in this paper) echo the sexagesimal tradition. The six working days (followed by a day of rest) also derive from sexagesimal notions, so we can see how, then as now, the two numerical methods intermix and overlap.

Having arrived at the end of our analysis of the textual development of the Decalogue, and counted the number of commandments in its various stages, we may summarize the arguments as follows:

1) The fact that there are twelve commandments, rather than ten, together with other observations, invites its interpretation as the result of textual development. Apparently, what we read in the Bible is not the original form of the Ten Commandments; there are indications of later additions.

2) On the basis of close analysis of textual inconsistencies, several stages of the Decalogue's development can be reconstructed. All the rel-

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 986 A; Iamblichus, *Theologumena arithmeticae*, ed. V. de Falco and U. Klein, 1975, 83. In this context it may be interesting to note that the Hittites could write the name of the chief deity of their pantheon, the storm-god, using the cuneiform sign for the number »Ten« which they prefixed with the determinative for »deity«; see E. von Schuler, »Kleinasien: Die Mythologie der Hethiter und Hurriter«, in: *Götter und Mythen im Vorderen Orient*, ed. H. W. Haussig, 1961, 141–215, on p. 209. Similarly, ten is the number Zoroastrians associate with their chief deity, Ahura Mazda; see M. Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathustras*, vol. 3, 2004, 11.

⁷ Iamblichus, *De communi mathematica scientia* 18,4. This may be relevant for understanding the »pentalogue«.

⁸ Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*, ed. J. Dillon et al., 1991, 172 (no. 158).

⁹ W. von Soden, *The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East*, 1994, 166.

evant problems can be solved by assuming that the Sabbath commandment (v. 12–15) and the list of civil commandments (v. 17–21) represent later additions, with the latter being added first, and the Sabbath commandment subsequently being added to the originally shorter text.

3) The final form of the text is marked by a tenfold use of Yahweh, the personal name of the Hebrew god. Summed up in the traditional Hebrew name of the Decalogue: »the ten words« (Deut 4,13), this feature may reflect the preference for a decimal (instead of a sexagesimal) system of counting.

II. *The Iniquity of the Fathers*

Preoccupied with counting the commandments – five, ten, or twelve –, commentators have often neglected the interpretive frame into which the commandments are set. It is to this framework that we will now turn, for it promises to reveal the original intention of the Decalogue. As we shall see, the framework is to be found in what we have reconstructed as the original nucleus of the Ten Commandments, the pentalogue. This text can be presented as follows:

(6) I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

(7) You shall have no gods besides me.

(8) You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

(9) You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I Yahweh your God am a jealous God, visiting *the iniquity of the fathers* upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (10) but showing steadfast love to the families of those who love me and keep my commandments.

(11) You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain, for Yahweh will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

(16a) Honour your father and your mother.

(16b) Thus Yahweh your God commands you, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you.

(Deut 5,6–11.16, English Standard Version, modified)

The structure of this short passage is clear enough: a list of five commandments is framed by an introduction (God's self-presentation, evoking the exodus theme) and a conclusion (adding a promise to those who heed the commandments, with reference to the giving of the land of

Canaan). Working on the structural aspects of this passage I discovered what may be called a numerical pattern: the commandments that form the central part of the text (Deut 5,7–11.16a), comprise 72 Hebrew words; seventy-two may be a sacred or significant number, though I am not sure of its meaning. What is obviously intentional, however, is the fact that the two central words of the passage are עֲוֹן אֲבוֹתַי, »the iniquity of the fathers«. The phrase is preceded by 35 words and followed by 35 words. I will argue that this expression is not only numerically central; the entire understanding of the passage hinges on it. But what exactly does »the iniquity of the fathers« mean? In what follows I will begin by studying this phrase in its wider biblical context, consider how it functions in our passage, and eventually also look at it from a comparative, social-psychological perspective to elucidate its full implications.

In order to understand this phrase, we have to answer two questions: what exactly is meant by »iniquity«? And who are those whose morality is called into question? Elucidation comes from the study of other biblical passages where the same words, »the iniquity of the father(s)« occur, for besides appearing in the Decalogue (Ex 20,5; Deut 5,9), the expression is used in at least thirteen other instances.¹⁰ Most of these passages deal with a people deemed to be evil – the Israelites; both in the present and in the past, but especially in the past, they have sinned; their sin, moreover, is not moral but cultic and ritual.¹¹ Prior to their becoming a pious, God-fearing people, the Israelites have habitually committed several kinds of forbidden acts: they have worshipped gods other than Yahweh (Jer 11,10), they made and worshipped idols (Lev 16,1–2) such as the Golden Calf in the desert (Num 9,2), they worshipped on the hillsides of the country rather than in Jerusalem alone, offered sacrifice in gardens and on bricks (instead of unhewn stones), they spent the night in tomb chambers, presumably for ancestor worship, they ate pork (Isa 65,3.4.7). Read in the light of these passages, the phrase »the iniquity of the fathers« is no longer a puzzle: the fathers are all the Israelite generations from the desert wanderings up to the present, and their sins are those of idolatry.

Historically speaking, the »iniquity of the fathers« is a highly polemical name given to Israel's pre-Josianic, pre-Deuteronomic religion, a

¹⁰ Ex 34,7; Lev 26,39–40; Num 14,18; Isa 14,21; 65,7; Jer 11,10; 14,20; 32,18; Thr 5,7; Ez 18,17.19; Ps 109,14; Dan 9,16; Neh 9,2. For studies of these passages, see L. Rost, »Die Schuld der Väter«, in: Rost, *Studien zum Alten Testament*, BWANT 101, 1974, 66–71; Th. Römer, *Israels Väter*, OBO 99, 1990, 410–413; and, on Thr 5:7, B.M. Levinson, »You must not add anything to what I command you: Paradoxes of Canon and Authorship in Ancient Israel«, *Numen* 50 (2003), 1–51, esp. 29–31.

¹¹ Exceptions are Isa 14,21, a passage dealing with a foreign ruler's cruelties committed during his military campaigns; and Ps 109,14, presumably referring to social crimes.

polytheistic cult which, beginning from the eighth century B.C.E., came under the attack of the Yahweh-alone movement. All the references to the »iniquity of the fathers« date from the sixth century B.C.E. or later, and this gives us a rough idea about what »up to the present« means. However, a more precise dating may be offered, at least tentatively, for the earliest references are found in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, who witnessed the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., and Jeremiah admits that his own generation is no better than the fathers':

We have sinned against Yahweh our God,
we and our fathers,
from our youth even to this day. (Jer 3,25)
We acknowledge our wickedness, O Yahweh,
and the iniquity of our fathers,
for we have sinned against you. (Jer 14,20)

Thus the last generation involved with the »iniquity« seems to be the one that saw the capture of Jerusalem and the subsequent deportation of many Judeans to Babylonia.

Defining the fathers' identity and iniquity, though essential, does not exhaust the meaning of the phrase under study. There is another dimension to it – that of inherited guilt. This archaic notion can be found throughout the ancient world, and a prayer of the Hittite King Mursilis II (late fourteenth century B.C.E.) is an early example:

It happens that people always sin. My father sinned as well, and he transgressed the word of the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord. But I did not sin. Nevertheless, it so happens that the father's sin comes upon his son, and so the sin of my father came upon me too.¹²

The same idea can be found in the Bible; characteristically, it is indicated by the term »the iniquity of the fathers«. Psalm 109 provides a good example. Here an innocent man is accused for the evil deed of not showing mercy to the poor but seeking to kill them; his enemies wish that »the iniquity of his fathers«, along with the sin of his mother, should be remembered by God; in this way, divine punishment of the (alleged) sinner is doubly deserved, for he is to be punished for his parents' as well as his own sins. The same idea can be found in the book of Job where Job's friends argue that »God stores up their iniquity (i.e., the punishment for evil people's sins) for their sons« (Job 21,19). Psalm 109 and the Job passage reflect archaic notions of collective responsibility

¹² I. Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 2002, 59.

for sin; the consequences of sin – divine punishment – have to be borne by one's children. Thus a criminal is considered not just in isolation; rather, he belongs to a family of criminals, a family that should be utterly destroyed. It is against this idea that the prophet Ezekiel protests, rejecting the archaic logic of divine punishment for inherited guilt (Ez 18). The pentologue, however, still shares the archaic notion.

Summarizing our analysis, we can say that »the iniquity of the fathers« is a phrase pregnant with meaning: a polemical designation for Israel's pre-Deuteronomic, polytheistic religion that provoked God's anger and, as a consequence, his collective punishment of the Israelites. Now, having dealt with this notion, we must return to the pentologue and its specific message.

The pentologue still promotes the idea of a »jealous God« who visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him. God does make a fundamental exception, however, for he does not extend this treatment to those who, loving him, heed his commandments. Thus the pentologue author, though far from abandoning it, qualifies the notion of inherited guilt and punishment. One has the impression that the pentologue's present generation is no longer as completely sinful as in Jeremiah's day; at least some of the Judeans, including the compiler of this text, consider themselves as no longer involved with the wicked deeds of the fathers. This may be one generation after Jeremiah, the one that grew up during the Babylonian exile, and presumably in Babylonia, some time around 540 B.C.E.¹³

At this point, we have to consider the question why the inheritance of guilt and punishment extends specifically to the children until the *third* and *fourth* generations, and not – as a merely mechanical notion of inheritance might imply – to an indefinite number of generations. The answer is quite simple and has to do with how the ancient Israelites perceived and defined their essential kinship group, the »father's house« (בֵּית אָב).¹⁴ This group comprised three generations: the father, the father's sons, and the son's son; within this group, the father enjoyed patriarchal authority; it seems, moreover, that the father's house also served as an economic unit so that all that was owned by the group's members could in a way be said to be owned by the patriarch. In order to visualize the actual functioning of the father's house, we may think of a generation as being twenty-five years; the patriarch would be seventy-five, his son fifty, and his grandson twenty-five, and it is easy to imagine

¹³ Most scholars assume, as I do, that at least portions of the book of Deuteronomy presuppose the end of the Judean monarchy and the subsequent crisis of the Babylonian exile (586–539 B.C.E.). D. R. Bratcher, »Deuteronomy«, *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, ed. P. J. Achtemeier, 1996, 239–241, esp. 240.

¹⁴ Sh. Bendor, *The Social Structure in Ancient Israel*, 1996, 45–118.

that the patriarch might actually live to see the fourth generation, i.e. his grandson's children. A biblical example of a three-generation-set is the »father's house« that left Mesopotamia to settle in Haran; it consisted of the patriarch Terah, his son Abram, and his grandson Lot (son of Abram's brother Haran; Gen 11,31). An example of a group of four generations living together comes from beyond the Bible, from Mesopotamia. In her funerary inscription, Adad-guppi, mother of the Babylonian King Nabonidus, is quoted as reporting happily: »I saw my great-great-grandchildren, up to the fourth generation, in good health and thus had my fill of old age.«¹⁵ The noble lady died at the matriarchal age of 104 years in 547 B.C.E., and thus her funerary inscription is approximately contemporaneous with the pentologue. We can also invoke the famous Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon (672 B.C.E.) in which the vassals promise loyalty across three generations; in Hebrew parlance: all those who belong to the same father's house have to swear allegiance to the ruler and his immediate successor.¹⁶

Accordingly, guilt and punishment are not passed on indefinitely to future generations. Instead, they are perceived to apply to all the members of a »father's house«, a social group under one authority that shares success and failure, joy and grief, prosperity and poverty, social esteem and ill reputation; always affected as a group, it enjoys the same moral, natural, economic, and political circumstances. In the case of guilt, especially bloodguilt, not only the actual culprit is taken to be responsible – the entire group is implicated.¹⁷ Given this understanding of the pentologue's »three or four generations«, we must reconsider and indeed redefine the meaning of the divine blessing which, according to standard English translations, God bestows upon »thousands (אלפים) of those who love me and keep my commandments« (Deut 5,10). Far from referring to a »thousand generations«, the relevant Hebrew word actually functions as a synonym for »father's house«,¹⁸ hence it is rendered as »family« in our translation. We assume, in other words, that in the pentologue, both divine punishment and blessing are seen as affecting one social unit: the father's household of three or (at most) four generations.

¹⁵ *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 1969, 561b.

¹⁶ Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty § 57, see *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*, ed. S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, 1988, 50.

¹⁷ For an example, see 2 Sam 21,1: »There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.« For a discussion, see J. S. Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTS 196, 1995, 104.

¹⁸ Bendor, *The Social Structure in Ancient Israel*, 94–97. See below the appendix on Deut 5,10.

A closer look at »the fathers« within the context of the pentologue gives us further insight into the sequence of the generations. The pentologue refers to parents twice. The first reference mentions the »iniquity of the fathers« (v. 9), while the second includes the command to honour one's father and mother (v. 16a). The parents that are to be honoured surely cannot be those whose iniquity is pointed out. Apparently, there is much interest in the succession of generations. In its (at first sight invisible) »deep structure«, the passage relates to three generations. They may be characterised as follows:

First Generation: Through its sinful polytheistic practice, this generation compromised and corrupted Israel's religion. As a result, the Babylonians annihilated the Judean state and deported this generation to Babylonia.

Second Generation: Having returned in faithfulness to monolatric worship of Yahweh, the children of the First Generation were granted (or expect to be granted soon) the reward of living again in Palestine.

Third Generation: Told by their parents to honour them by staying faithful to their allegiance to the one God, the children of the Second Generation are promised residence in the land, i.e. they are assured that there will not be another loss of land and deportation.

Consideration of this sequence of generations permits us to look into the very heart of the pentologue. The First Generation is that of the »bad« ancestors, those who, like many earlier generations, committed »the iniquity of the fathers«. The national disaster – the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile – is blamed on »the iniquity of the fathers«, i.e., their violation of the commandment to worship Yahweh exclusively. The »fathers« are the parents of the generation born in exile: the men who in 609 B.C.E. defected from King Josiah's reform by returning to Judah's traditionally polytheistic religion. Due to their sins, they were punished by exile.

From the perspective of our text, then, there are two groups within the Second Generation. One group is characterized as those who, hating God, are his enemies, while the others are God's friends and faithful followers of his commandments. How God, on his part, relates to and deals with each of the groups corresponds to their respective natures. In order to render the meaning of the laconic wording correctly, we may expand and paraphrase it as follows: »Among those who are hostile to me, I shall punish the sons and the third and fourth generations for the iniquity of the fathers. Among those who love me and who obey my commandments, *I shall refrain from avenging the iniquity of the fathers;*

instead, I shall show to them and to their whole family my steadfast love.«

People do not automatically belong to one or the other group. Even though the term is absent here (but is used in similar contexts), a »turning« or »conversion« is possible and actually is called for. The present generation – the Second Generation by our reckoning, the one to whom the pentologue is addressed – is challenged to renounce the iniquity of their fathers. They are invited to practice the true religion in order to escape the divine punishment meted out to their parents' generation. This exhortation is based on God's offer to suspend punishment as soon as people embrace pure monolatric Yahwism in an act of sincere conversion. This act implies a definitive rejection of their fathers' bad ways. Moreover, it implies a high degree of solidarity between what we have called the Second and the Third Generation: those who belong to the Third Generation are told to honour their father and mother, i.e. to follow their parents' adoption of the pure Yahwistic cult. Referring to this true worship, the book of Deuteronomy states: »The things that are revealed belong to us and to our sons for ever, that we may do all the words of this law« (Deut 29,29 [Hebrew 29,28]).

In the Deuteronomic context, the Third Generation is of paramount importance. The Third Generation – the sons and daughters of those who returned from the exile – is admonished to honour their parents' decision to stay faithful to the exclusive worship of the one God. The discontinuity between the First and the Second Generation is balanced by continuity between the Second and Third Generations. This continuity was no doubt primarily seen in religious terms, so it was logical to place the commandment »Honour your father and your mother« at the end of the Decalogue's religious injunctions. Those who are faithful to God are, by implication, obedient to their parents, for they fulfil their parents' basic religious commandment. By virtue of the same logic, those who defect from God are disobedient toward their parents.

The theme of the contrast between two generations of different moral fibre – a bad one, marked by apostasy, followed by a good one that returns to Yahweh – is not restricted to the compilers of the pentologue; it also figures prominently elsewhere in the Bible, and we can easily see how it resonates with and indeed echoes the situation of Israel's exilic period. In the legendary period of the desert wanderings there was a generation of sinful fathers who revolted against the authority of Moses.¹⁹ The rebellious generation had to endure a series of

¹⁹ Num 11,1–12,16; 14,1–45; 16,1–35; 20,1–13; 21,4–9; Ps 78,8; 95,9; 106,6. – The theme of the »generations« has received excellent treatment by D.T. Olson, albeit without recognizing its setting in and relevance for the exilic period: D. T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of Numbers and the Pentateuch*,

hardships and punishments; it also had to stay in the desert (historically speaking, in the desert of the Babylonian exile). This generation of the fathers was followed by a second, obedient generation that was allowed to leave the desert and to settle in the promised land of Palestine; (historically speaking, it may return to Palestine after the exile). Those who belong to the new generation, the bearers of hope, are exhorted not to follow in the steps of their rebellious fathers: »They should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God« (Ps 78,8). This is also the message the pentologue has for all the Jews who expect to return or have already returned from exile: they are told to disassociate themselves from the »iniquity of the fathers« and thereby secure their future in postexilic Palestine.

The dissociation from the parental generation, so eloquently advocated by the pentologue, invites a psychological interpretation, and so we come to our final subject: the psychological study of the iniquities of the fathers. The Decalogue's thinking in terms of generations reminds us of the rejection of the parental generation typical of modern social »movements«. In Germany, after World War I, the new generation formed a movement (Jugendbewegung) to dissociate themselves from their belligerent fathers, and the same attitude was typical of the 1960s when, belatedly, the student generation rather violently rejected the »brown«, Nazi establishment that had survived in political and academic institutions. The unmasking of the fathers as criminals must always be thought of as traumatic, an experience that leads to what the social psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich calls the »fatherless society« (vaterlose Gesellschaft): a society whose members are condemned to condemn the parental generation. Condemnation, of course, does not settle the matter; as Mitscherlich has observed, »the collapse of the authority of the father leads almost automatically to the search for another father-figure who promises renewed stability and purpose«. ²⁰ In my own student days, in the 1960s, the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch and the social democrat Willy Brandt were among those who enjoyed the status of popular father-figures, if only for a few years. The fact that they had suffered from the evil Nazi regime – the former as a Jewish thinker and the second as a communist – contributed to their prestige. And now, how about the pentologue's »iniquity of the fathers«?

As is well known not only among psychologists, the feelings a son has for his father are ambivalent: on the one hand, the boy admires, imi-

1985. In the book of Numbers, Olson recognizes the following structure: Num 1–25 deals with the old generation, Num 26ff with the new one; each of the two generations is introduced by a public census.

²⁰ A. Mitscherlich, *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft*, 1963, 368.

tates and loves his father; on the other hand, as his own, independent personality develops, he seeks to distance himself from his father in ways that may escalate to open conflict and rebellion. Thus love and hate, the two basic emotions actually mentioned in the pentologue, are present in the same relationship. Yet, despite this natural potential for rejection, a son's discovery of the father's sinfulness and inability to live up to ethical standards is generally experienced as painful and even traumatic, all the more when an entire parental generation comes to be considered as criminal. At this point, an observation made by Sigmund Freud seems relevant, at least at first sight. According to the founder of psychoanalysis, this discipline

has made us aware of the intimate connection between the father-complex and the belief in God, and has taught us that the personal God is psychologically nothing other than a magnified father; it shows us every day how young people can lose their religious faith as soon as their father's authority collapses. We thus recognise the root of religious authority as lying in the parental complex.²¹

For Freud at that time, God, in the child's imagination, is the magnified father, and as the child becomes an adult, both the human father's authority and its divine echo begin to wane. While this mechanism may have been valid for Vienna of the early 1900s, it is not necessarily a general law, valid for all cultures and times. Thus, as an alternative to Freud's suggestion, we argue that the waning of the human father's authority may actually strengthen someone's belief in a powerful God. In this sense, the psalmist declares: »My father and my mother have forsaken me, but Yahweh will take me in« (Ps 27,10).

Freud, an excellent writer, sometimes consciously went beyond the immediate data available to him as a doctor by reconstructing a patient's psychohistory in the form of what he called an imaginative »family novel«. We may be bold enough to follow Freud's example and, relying on learned speculation, suggest the following »family novel« of the Decalogue author's belief in God: The last years of monarchic Jerusalem was a time of turmoil; twice the Babylonians captured Jerusalem (597 and 586 B.C.E.) and there were two deportations of many Judeans to Babylonia plus the destruction of the city. Not only the city, but also the temple and the entire political and social structures were destroyed. Judah as a state ceased to exist. It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact the cataclysmic events of this period had on the political, religious, and cultural life of the biblical people, and, not least, on their psychological situation. The political catastrophe was followed by another, moral one, for the younger generation began to blame the national disaster on their parents' generation and its defection from Yahwistic orthodoxy; by

²¹ S. Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* [1910], 1932, 103.

their apostasy, the fathers had provoked the divine anger that led to the political disaster. Psychologically speaking, the second, moral catastrophe was even more devastating than the first, political one, for it led to a breakdown in civil authority and, as a consequence, to the discontinuity between the parental and the filial generations. As the younger generation became aware of the iniquity of their fathers and, as a result, paternal authority dissolved, an empty space remained, a vacuum that demanded to be filled. The author of the Decalogue had no doubt about how this was to be achieved: worshipped exclusively, the divine father would compensate for the terrible and traumatic loss of the human father's authority. Once God had been accepted as a father-figure, that figure was endowed with one's own feelings – those of anger with and hate for one's actual father. An example of this kind of projection may be quoted from psychoanalytical literature: a woman, upon discovering that her father was a Nazi criminal, came to reject and indeed to hate him; one day during psychiatric treatment, she saw in a dream how God vented his righteous anger against him by a terrible earth-shaking thunderstorm; she actually felt that »my own inner state of agitation was echoed in the sky« (der Himmel spiegelt die Turbulenzen meines Innern).²² Thus it is God, too, and not just the daughter, who hates her father.

Rejection of, and hatred for, the parents, together with a strengthened belief in God, are visible results of what we have called the second catastrophe; however, we must not forget another one of its consequences: hope and optimism inspired by religious belief. If worshiped correctly by the new generation, God surely would end his people's suffering, and would not withhold his blessings, but grant »long life in the land«. Belief in the benign and all-powerful deity compensated for their political helplessness.

Unexpectedly, theoretical confirmation for this analysis comes from none other than Freud. In an essay written seventeen years after our earlier quotation, Freud no longer claims that the child's belief in God vanishes at the onset of adulthood: »As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one«, i.e. God.²³ While Freud, in *The Future of an Illu-*

²² J. Müller-Hohagen, »Seelische Weiterwirkungen aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus. Zum Widerstreit der Loyalitäten«, in: *Unverlierbare Zeit: Psychosoziale Spätfolgen des Nationalsozialismus bei Nachkommen von Opfern und Tätern*, ed. K. Grünberg and J. Straub, 2001, 83–118, quotation 93.

²³ S. Freud, »The Future of an Illusion« (1927), in: *Freud and Freudians on Religion*, ed. D. Capps, 2001, 55.

sion, does not comment on the possibility of faith being strengthened by the experience of being disillusioned with one's human father, he at least admits that the general experience of helplessness is a contributing factor in the formation of someone's life-long belief in God. A more comprehensive confirmation, based on Freudian psychology, comes from Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich. The identification with an ideal person or cause, and the conflict with authority, they argue, are both essential and indeed indispensable ingredients to healthy mental development in early life.²⁴ Thus the younger generation's enthusiasm for the »one God«, linked to a rebellion against the fathers, corresponds to a pattern that these two German psychologists take to be typical.

Summarizing our argument, we might say that the demise of the Judean state in 586 B.C.E. had three psychological consequences: the denouncement of the parental generation as criminals; the turning toward another authority to compensate for the lost one – to God; the attribution of one's own angry feelings about the fathers to God. The connection between the loss of paternal authority, the development of monolatric worship, and the notion of the God who hates the disobedient can only be indicated here; never, to my knowledge, having been suggested, let alone explored, it awaits further study.

Having completed our analysis of the expression »the iniquity of the fathers«, we may summarize our findings:

1) The implied injunction to turn away from the »iniquity of the fathers« forms the very centre of the original series of commandments (v. 9). The »iniquity« refers to the non-observance of the commandment to worship Yahweh exclusively by those who were punished with exile. This interpretation leads to a dating of the text to the postexilic period.

2) The exilic generation's denouncement of the iniquity of the fathers indicates a complete collapse of the paternal generation's authority; psychological considerations suggest that it was God who, worshipped exclusively, came to fill the vacuum left by that collapse.

3) Addressed to those who returned from the Babylonian exile, or expect to return soon, in the late sixth century B.C.E., the Ten Commandments were composed in response to a specific historical situation. Bound to that context, they do not claim to establish a universal ethic.

Appendix: Linguistic notes on the translation of the Decalogue

The English rendering of the Decalogue that forms the basis of the above essay differs from the well-known versions in several places.

²⁴ A. and M. Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*, 1967, 260.

These differences rest on new insight into the meaning and syntactic use of certain Hebrew words. The following notes seek to justify my translation.

Deut 5,7 – (7) »You shall have no gods [literally: other gods] besides me.«

According to all translations I have consulted, the first commandment refers to »other gods«: »You shall have no other gods before me« (v. 6). The expression »other gods« (אלהים אחרים) requires further explanation. Since, in biblical Hebrew, אלהים means both »god« and »gods«, i.e. god in the singular and in the plural, the Decalogue adds אחרים to the noun to define it as a plural form – an elegant solution to the linguistic problem. The extra word does not add anything to the meaning of אלהים; merely a linguistic device, it does not have to be imitated in English. Since the English language clearly differentiates between God and the gods, the supporting adjective can be dispensed with, so we can speak, quite simply, of »gods«. Linguistically speaking: when asking how, in the language of Deuteronomy, one would form the plural of אלהים (god), then the answer must be to write: אלהים אחרים.

Deut 5,10 – Together with the preceding verse, the passage reads as follows:

(9) »... I Yahweh your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (10) but showing steadfast love to the *families* (אלפים) of those who love me and keep my commandments.«

Traditionally, the end of v. 10 is rendered as follows: »... to *thousands* (אלפים) of those who love me and keep my commandments«, but the parallelism with »the children to the third and fourth generation« seems to be a synonymous one, and so one would expect something like »the whole family«, an idea presumably implied in the »thousands«; in fact, recent lexicography actually assumes the existence of אלה III »tribe, clan, family«, though without mentioning the Decalogue, see *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. D. J. Clines, vol. 1, 1993, 299–300.

Deut 5,12 – (12) »Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Thus (כאשר) Yahweh your God commands you: (13) For six days you shall labour and do all your work ...«

Traditionally, v. 12 is rendered as follows: »... to keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. (13) For six days you shall labour ...«. I do not take the Hebrew word כאשר (traditionally: »as«) to be an adverb referring back, although in biblical Hebrew it is often used in this sense. Rarely, as in the present case, it points forward and can actually introduce a sentence. This function is attested in inscriptions, see Ostrakon Mousaïeff no. 1 (7th century B.C.E.), a short text that begins with a phrase reminiscent of the Decalogue: »Thus (כאשר) commands

you Ashyahu«. See B. Lang, »The Decalogue in the Light of a Newly Published Paleo-Hebrew Inscription (Hebrew Ostrakon Mousaïeff No. 1)«, JSOT 77 (1998), 21–25. Given the elusive nature of adverbs in general, it is not surprising that the true meaning of **כֹּאשֶׁר** has not been understood correctly in the past: »The adverb in any language is typically the most complicated and least understood of the traditional parts of speech. It is elusive due to its wide range of functions ...«, B. T. Arnold and J. H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2003, 127.

Deut 5,16 – (16a) »Honour your father and your mother. / (16b) Thus (**כֹּאשֶׁר**) Yahweh your God commands you, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you.«

The traditional rendering is as follows: »Honour your father and your mother, as (**כֹּאשֶׁר**) the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long ...« However, it seems more likely that v. 16a and 16b are to be kept separate. As in the case of v. 12, **כֹּאשֶׁר** introduces a sentence; the traditional rendering mistakes the promise of land (v. 16b) as referring exclusively to the parental commandment; in reality, the promise belongs to all of the preceding (as well as following) commandments.

Originally, the passage known as the (Deuteronomic) Decalogue comprised only five commandments: to worship God exclusively, not to make idols, not to serve deities, not to misuse the name of God, and to honour one's parents. Subsequently, this pentologue was enlarged by »civil« commandments to form a series of ten items. Eventually, the injunction to keep the Sabbath holy was also added. The present form of Deuteronomy 5,6–21 is legitimately called the »ten words« by the significant, tenfold use of the divine name. Addressed to the generation returning (or expecting to return) from Babylonian exile, the pentologue tells its audience to dissociate themselves from the »iniquity of the fathers«. The fathers' sin of worshipping gods other than Yahweh led to the downfall of the Judean state, the loss of the land, and, as a consequence, to the collapse of the authority of the past generation. Turned to in an act of spiritual reorientation and worshipped exclusively, however, the father-figure of God will compensate for the terrible and traumatic loss of parental authority.

Originellement, le texte connu sous le nom de Décalogue (deutéronomique) se composait de cinq commandements seulement: servir Dieu seul, ne pas fabriquer des idoles, ne pas se prosterner devant des divinités, ne pas prononcer le nom de dieu à tort, et honorer les parents. Par la suite, ce »pentologue« religieux fut enrichi par plusieurs prescriptions »civiles« afin d'aboutir à une série de dix commandements; finalement, le commandement du Sabbat fut insérée. C'est à juste titre que la forme canonique de Deut 5,6–21 est appelée les »dix paroles« par ce que le nom divin s'y trouve dix fois. Adressé à la génération revenant de l'exil babylonien (ou espèrent en revenir), le pentologue invite ses auditeurs à se dissocier de la »faute des pères«. Cette faute – la vénération des dieux autres que Yahvéh – conduisit à la chute du royaume de Juda, la perte du pays et, par conséquent, à la ruine de l'autorité de la génération précédente. Si l'on se tourne vers Dieu dans un acte de ré-orientation spirituelle, la figure paternelle de Dieu comblera la lacune laissée par la perte terrible et traumatique de l'autorité du père humain.

Der als (deuteronomischer) Dekalog bekannte Abschnitt umfasste ursprünglich nur fünf Gebote: Gott allein zu verehren, keine Bilder herzustellen, keinen Göttern zu dienen, den Namen Gottes nicht zu missbrauchen, und die Eltern zu ehren. In der Folgezeit wurde dieser Pentalog durch »weltliche« Bestimmungen erweitert, sodass sich eine Reihe von zehn Geboten ergab. Schließlich wurde noch das Sabbatgebot eingefügt. Die jetzige Gestalt von Dtn 5,6–21 wird mit Recht die »zehn Worte« genannt, ist doch der Gottesname in diesem Text zehnmal enthalten. An die Generation derer gerichtet, die aus dem babylonischen Exil zurückkehren (oder zurückzukehren hoffen), fordert der Pentalog dazu auf, vom »Frevel der Väter« Abstand zu nehmen. Die Sünde der Väter, nämlich andere Götter als Jahwe zu verehren, hatte zum Untergang des jüdischen Staates geführt, zum Verlust des Landes und, als weitere Folge, auch zum Zusammenbruch der Autorität der letzten Generation. Erfolgt eine Zuwendung zum göttlichen Vater in einem Akt spiritueller Neuorientierung, so kann Gott den schrecklichen und traumatischen Verlust der väterlichen Autorität ausgleichen.